Nice Work If You Can Get It

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Nice Work If You Can Get It

by orphan_account, whiskeyandspite

Summary

"I'm told we owe you some gratitude, Mr. Graham," Hannibal says, without any introduction. He doesn't suppose he needs much of one, though he wants to see how the man will bite in response to his effective block in the usual round of introductions. He held the door indicatively, suggesting by implication they should walk together. When they are alone, he might shoot the fed, or he might feed him. He hasn't decided quite yet the value of either notion.

This started as a request prompt fill for the lovely cannibalismforbeginners on Tumblr, and grew - as prompts do between cognomen and I - into a monster. A mobster AU fic where Hannibal runs the biggest human trafficking ring in America, and Will is the new FBI agent sent to bring him down with a rico case. Hannibal knows who he is but plays along nonetheless, because he, in turn, wants something from Will.

[we based this in Philadelphia in 1937. For a tentative timeline, chapter 1 takes place late November of 1936]

THERE IS ALSO A TRAILER

Notes

This is a fully completed fic of about 90,000 words. We will be posting it weekly on Wednesdays. Comments and criticisms welcome, and requests are welcome too.

Again, cognomen wrote for Hannibal, I wrote for Will. I hope you guys enjoy UST.

For those interested, Will is 26 here, Hannibal is 46

[title is a song by Frank Sinatra]

Chapter 1

It's raining the first time he meets Will Graham - the boys that introduced him are a pair of grinning caporegimes that don't understand the size of the wolf they have just brought into the den. Hannibal was on his way out, with a long tan coat draped over his arm, the fedora slung low over his eyes as he took in what the boys had brought him and assessed instantly - federal agent.

Hannibal isn't the capo famiglia yet, he isn't anything technically, by very careful measured deeply greased palms. He is an assistant, he reports only up, but no one officially reports to him. He was given the word once, consigliere, but he'd never truly allowed it to stick.

With only the lightest touch of authority, he stepped in to take command of the 'new recruit', and perhaps there was some warning of where he really stood when the capos surrendered hold of what could be a brilliant new soldier without the least squeak of protest. It's elegant, really, much like the rest of the picture he presented.

Will doesn’t look at Hannibal, doesn’t look at anyone really. He keeps his eyes on the space just above Hannibal’s navel, where he can see his hands moving and determine whether or not he’ll need to reach for his gun or duck behind the nearest wall or run like hell. Hands say a lot about a person, people take body language for granted more than Will can even begin to reiterate, so he’s stopped trying. But it has saved him in the past and he continues to believe it will in future.

He’d spent months researching, following the man’s movements within the mob and without, studying where he went, what he ordered, how he responded to people, the way he looked at them… Will learned all there was to learn about Hannibal without asking a single thing about him, without even saying a word to him. Jack had not been impressed. Jack had wanted action. Jack had wanted infiltration. So, knowing what he knew, Will did. The best way he knew the man would respond.

Will Graham was determined to slide in under the skin of this system the way Hannibal had - it was why he recognized the attitude, the eager way he wore a gun tucked under at least one arm and his suit jacket unbuttoned to make reaching it easy. The way he stepped silent and respectful and kept his eyes down and pushed hard enough that he'd be impressive.

"I'm told we owe you some gratitude, Mr. Graham," Hannibal says, without any introduction. He doesn't suppose he needs much of one, though he wants to see how the man will bite in response to his effective block in the usual round of introductions. He held the door indicatively, suggesting by implication they should walk together. When they are alone, he might shoot the fed, or he might feed him. He hasn't decided quite yet the value of either notion.

“I believe you won’t be the first to owe me gratitude,” Will replies, turning his head just enough to see the men who’d escorted him step back and away. He swallows lightly before turning back, straightening his shoulders and walking to the indicated door. He could be dead

when he steps through that, leaving Hannibal at his back as the man was clearly suggesting. But nothing Hannibal has done has indicated that he wants to attack Will, or kill him, and he's not a man to shoot someone in the back when he can see their eyes as they die.

Will steps through, quickly flicking his collar up against the wind and pushing his hands into the pockets of his coat.

"If you play both sides, one side is bound to kill you." He continues, "Though it's understandable why neither you nor Bruno wanted to do the honors. Police commissioners are noticed, when missing." He offers Hannibal a thin smile and wonders if that's the last thing he will ever say; as far as famous last words go, Will's certain he could've done worse. The commissioner wasn't dead. Bloody, yes, thoroughly surprised by the assault, yes, but not dead. Just no longer in Philadelphia.

Under the awning outside, Hannibal slips on his coat, and considers the drizzle in the early Philadelphia evening, late in the year as it is. It might well turn to snow as the evening goes on, not the first of the year, but the first with potential to make a real nuisance of itself. He waits for Will to settle.

"I suppose not," Hannibal concedes, with a faint upward quirk of his mouth. "I find it unusual to owe favors to those I don't know well. I just wanted to be certain you knew I paid my debts anyway."

He doesn't offer a handshake, not in public. The press tended to hover everywhere these days, and maybe even on a day as horrible as this one, there were journalists laid out flat with long lenses in the apartments across the street, rubbing unit shoulders with the detectives that spent time trying to learn whatever they could. It could ruin the man or raise him up, a handshake from Lecter. Right now, he offers neither.

"It's a shame when men make foolish decisions without considering their young, beautiful wives," Hannibal suggests, keeping his tone in careful sympathy. "And expecting, too. I hope she recovers from the shock."

Will tries not to bristle, but perhaps it was his upbringing, or the warning bells that inevitably ring around any member of the mob, but the thought of Hannibal Lecter even knowing about the commissioner's wife set Will's teeth on edge. He put it down to the cold, and hoped the other man would too.

While William's eyes are angled down, Hannibal unhesitantly takes in what was in front of him. Compact, but not as short as he seemed. Will Graham has a thin build and eyes that ran unsteadily away from contact, and a square jaw that seems incongruous with the rest of him. He is handsome, and wears an outdated suit that fits him poorly. He has sloppy, dark ringlets in the style that flappers had worn, now invariably tamed carefully into waves. He doesn't seem to have a hat.

He turns seemingly at random and steps out into the rain with his collar turned up against it, his hat still at an aggressive angle over his eyes. "Come to dinner with me, Mr. Graham. I believe we should get to know each other."

The scrutiny, too, doesn't go unnoticed. Will stays still enough to be observed but not enough to show he is aware of it. He turns his head to the rain, eyes seeking out the fifth window on the fourth floor where he knows some agents are stationed. He keeps his eyes there deliberately for a long time, wondering if they were unnerved, if anyone on shift knew him and would attempt to report… he was under cover. He doubts anyone but Jack and his team knew he was here.

And now they did too. The press is a powerful weapon. He wouldn't be killed here, not in this alley. When he turns back, at Hannibal's words, the relief was evident.

"Of course." It was not an invitation. Even beyond studying the man's movement for as long as he had been, Will had seen films. You don't reject and offer of dinner. And an offer of dinner was not always what it appeared.

The acceptance isn't quite eager. The man is well scripted and well-practiced. Hannibal knows he has to walk exactly in a certain way, but it was amusing to see him navigate the very earliest twists and turns with a skill that wasn't quite effortless. Hannibal is curious to see if he'll warm into the task and get better at it, or if he'll lose his way.

He might be useful in the meantime.

Leading down the street, Hannibal seems content to walk, intimately familiar with his city - and seemingly utterly fearless. He has no guards, no one with him but Will Graham, the new member. There isn't a hint to his suspicion. Hannibal settles his hands in his pockets, and turns on twelfth, looking unerringly up the street at the Reading Terminal Market - a strange place to consider for food - unless one intended to cook it themselves.

"I know it's considered impolite to look a gift horse in the mouth," Hannibal continues, apparently satisfied with Will's responses to this point. "But I wonder what your purpose was in doing such a big favor, Mr. Graham. Not that I'm not grateful, but I understand you're new to the area in the first place. Were you discontent with the current leadership?"

Will follows in silence, not quite at ease but not trying to be. He doubts anyone was ever at ease with this man, even those who work with – and under – him on a regular basis. At his words he glances up, offering a small smile before letting his eyes slide off the man like the rain was; not heavy but certainly present.

"To be honest, I've been meaning to a long while," he answers, "Dangerous as it is to say this to you, Mr. Lecter, not everything revolves around your… corporation." The irony, he is sure, would not be lost, "The man irked me. The favor, as you call it, was a personal vendetta."

He doesn't acknowledge Hannibal's words as gratitude, almost ignores them, like Hannibal had chosen to ignore introductions. It's a dangerous move, but this was not a man you won over by praising and worship. He was won over, if ever, by loyalty and proof of it. If Will survives the evening, he will count himself lucky. He knows for a fact that, if anything, it will be a while until Hannibal Lecter forgets his name. And sometimes being known and remembered was better than being instantly in.

"And yet it was through my front doors," Hannibal answers, directly, with barely a pause to digest the information, "That you came with your victory, Mr. Graham."

He carefully orchestrates his tone to suggest that he perhaps knows exactly what Will was seeking. He arches his brows and tips his head to have a more direct look at him out from under the brim of his hat as they reach the market, and he checks his wet coat and hat with the courtesy clerk before moving deeper.

It seems strange to Will – and did, during his observations – that Hannibal rarely ate out, despite most of the restaurants offering not only free dinner but unlimited alcohol. Though, Will is sure, the reason for that was because Hannibal controlled most of the alcohol in the city, among other things. He was here for those, not to settle gambling debt or bust the man for alcohol distribution.

“I believe it was a case of being at the right diner at the wrong time,” he answers, choosing not to pass his coat over as Hannibal passed his, and instead just turns the collar down again, following Hannibal into the market. “Your associates saw me and thought the deed deserved a mention.”

"Regardless I am grateful that your vendetta coincides with my interests. Or appears to anyway," Hannibal continues, basket over his arm, as he makes his way to a market boasting baskets of ripe produce. "Though I suspect you want more from me for it than dinner."

Will inclines his head at the thanks and allows himself to smile more. “Dinner is already more than I expected for doing something I’ve wanted to do for years,” he confirms, “Though I can’t say it’s unwelcome.”

"I'd be curious to hear how you became enemies," Hannibal keeps his tone light, with genuine curiosity, watching the other assemble the steps through the game in his mind, and navigate them. "So I can avoid making the same mistakes."

Will smiles, raising his eyes to regard Hannibal’s face properly for the first time before following him to the next stall. Will has never had a problem with lying, he can keep a story afloat even when there’s a gun to his head and seconds before someone’s trigger finger slips. His issue has always been coming up with believable lies on the fly, and he almost wants to kick himself for the sheer idiocy of not coming up with a coherent story as to why he hated the poor commissioner so much. He has a skeleton of a story but not the body of one.

“Is there a term for sibling rivalry equivalent with family friends?” he asks, “Being compared to someone your entire life, being pushed to be like them and berated for taking your own path starts to weigh on the nerves. Certainly so when you end up on a higher moral path than your apparently perfect counterpart.” Will shrugs, surprised at how much truth his words held; those were always the most effective and easy to sustain lies. “So I killed him. perhaps I should spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder wondering who was compared to me.”

He lets the answer rest and concentrates on watching Hannibal. There is something so strange about watching one of Philadelphia’s most powerful men shop for produce for dinner like any normal person might, and for a moment, a brief silly moment, Will forgets that this man runs

on average four hundred people into the city a month, for only God knows what. He knows that if this goes sour, a shot to the knee would be a blessing before a shot to the head. He's certain if he's found out he'll find himself in a shipment.

There, actual eye contact. Hannibal smiles, while he watches Will assemble his lies into a neat line in the face of clear adversity. He thinks that he might have poked a slight hole in the cover, but it reassembles clearly enough. Quickly, too. Hannibal wonders what that mind could do when arrayed for his purposes, rather than against them.

He supposes he has time enough to lead him along and see if there's any possibility of finding out.

Listening, Hannibal's mouth quirks up at one side. "Perhaps you should." He'd put his money on Will in a fight, however. It was an interesting story - that he had a chip on his shoulder from his upbringing, to cause his theoretically unexplainable violence. Old grudges were the most satisfying to resolve.

"What do you think I want from you, Mr. Lecter?" Will asks after a moment, smile still present, shoving away the thoughts of the man's inhumanity for the time being to keep his face clear, "What do men like me usually want from men like you?"

Hannibal pulls capers, a head of garlic, fresh parsley and basil, and various other things, before making his payment and heading for a stall displaying fresh caught fish. It looks eclectic, the array of what he's picking up, but he seems to know exactly what he wants rather than to be shopping without actual intent for whatever caught his eye. He takes two pounds of scallops still in their shells.

He smiles at that question, the unusual technique of turning a question around on him - not something Hannibal often got. He considers Will briefly. "Men like you usually want to occupy the space that I currently hold, Mr. Graham."

His last stop is the butcher, where the man seems to know him well, requires only an indication that Hannibal requires 2 of whatever it is he's here for to begin carefully cutting and packaging it for him.

"But not you, I think. It's clear you have an ambition, but I think you're smart enough to realize that only someone very specific can do what I do." There was money and power aplenty, if you were Hannibal Lecter, but if someone tried to push him out of the way and seat themselves instead, they'd find everything withering under them. "Your ambition is a different sort."

Will actually meets Hannibal's eyes at his words, allowing his smile to become comfortable, almost relaxed, before lowering his eyes in amusement and turning away.

"It's the façade everyone wants. The money, the women, the alcohol. Not the work behind it." He shrugs, watching Hannibal pick up the rest of what he needs for dinner and meditating on the stall a moment, "The worst thing is to inherit a position of power, that's why princes who overthrew their fathers rarely ruled for long. Because the men who work to get where they are, they have their problems and the solutions ready. Those who simply take end up

with problems and no ace." He licks his lips, brows furrowing a little in thought, "I would prefer to struggle for the decadence you have than to land in it and drown."

Hannibal tucks all of his purchases together into a bag once he's completed his rounds, and folds it carefully over in three precise tucks. He picks up his coat on the way back out, careful to tuck the bag beneath it, though there is nothing in it that would be ruined by a little water, and he resettles his hat on his head after tipping the attendant on the side of generosity. "If you have to overthrow someone to get to your position, rather than simply let it slip onto you like a glove," Hannibal agreed, "It'll never be a successful one."

"Does your preference mean you're still aiming to try and take my position from me someday, Mr. Graham?" He asks, once they are on the street again. The trip was short, but it has still grown darker and cooler enough that the rain has turned to heavy, white flakes. "I'm not far, but the roads will be icy soon. Do you have a long way back home this evening?"

Will allows another slip of his mask to look at Hannibal again, his smile widening enough to draw his lips back.

"Perhaps I won't take it," he assures him, "Perhaps I'll sidle up and let it slip onto me like a glove. Someday." The thought amuses him. He wonders how long it will take him to get enough information to bring the whole organization down. He wonders what it will take out of him and if this will make his name or break it.

Hannibal arches his eyebrows at the implied challenge, but - he could see how easily the man was sliding himself in here. How carefully. How he didn't betray himself with anything but what Hannibal could smell on him instinctively. It was only Will's bad luck that Hannibal was suspicious enough. He'd slipped by neatly to this point.

It's only a fair to take the bait thrown to him and see where the line led. Hannibal would have to be careful, but he always was.

The snow outside isn't a surprise so much as an annoyance. Will had taken a cab to the diner, had walked the rest of the way with Hannibal since. And the only thing awaiting him at his apartment is a cold draft, a broken deadbolt and a hungry dog. He could get the neighbour to feed it until he comes home; dinner, as mentioned, in such circles implies much more besides.

"I'll get a cab," he tells him, pushing his hands further into his pockets and wishing he hadn't been an idiot about forgetting his scarf. "Though I'll admit in this weather, dinner is sounding more and more appropriate and welcome. I'll make a note to take my personal vendettas out in public more often."

Hannibal seems impervious to the cold as he leads Will up 12th, and then two blocks down a cross street to tenth avenue - nice apartments, in high rises, over shops on the lower floors at street level and perhaps offices above. He nods in response to the suggestion of a cab. "Allow me. I appreciate intelligent company. And, if they coincide with my interests I would be pleased to make you as many meals as you'd like, Mr. Graham."

His building has a doorman, who greets them without a remote blink of surprise at Hannibal's company. They exchange comments on the weather and Hannibal encourages the man to

have a mind for his extremities before they enter and wait for the slow progress of the old lift. "How have you found Philadelphia so far? It's not so large as New York, and not so active."

At least not on the surface.

Will follows, allowing himself to be impressed but not surprised. Of course Hannibal would live here, in the middle of the hidden higher classes pretending they weren't what they were. Nonetheless, getting out of the wind is welcome. The question catches him off guard just slightly, as he supposes it should, but he keeps the majority of his panic wrapped securely under his thin shirt.

"It's just as cold," he counters, stamping his feet against the floor to rid his shoes of snow and, perhaps, to get feeling back into his toes. "And one can actually believe snow is white, here, as opposed to the same color as the rest of the sludge of the city."

He hadn't enjoyed New York. He had been sent there after Quantico so study up on Hannibal as far away as was safe. His primary research into the mob's working and inner circle had been done there, before he'd moved to Philadelphia to watch the man properly, letting his research be grounded and backed up by what he was seeing. New York, however, hadn't appeared to let him go just as easily as Will had let it go.

"They say one shouldn't live in New York City long enough to make them hard of mind," he says, "Is that what gave me away?"

"I knew you'd spent time in a city," Hannibal answers, without taking the obvious jibe at the man's suit saying otherwise. He wasn't city bred, he wasn't old money or new money. The lift ticks its way down the floors like Hannibal might otherwise tick the points off in his fingers, if he weren't holding a bag dry under his coat. "I knew you knew your way around enough to not get lost."

He doesn't mean in the standard definition of the word. Will clearly knows how to navigate the various issues that are contingent with a family owned city like this one. Where better to get the practice? "And you knew me, yet I had to dig to learn anything about you. So you weren't from here, either."

Hannibal spent a lot of time in New York, checking his acquisitions on the docks. It only made sense they'd sent Graham there to study him. "It was just a lucky guess," Hannibal smiles at him instead, and pulls back the gate to hold it politely for will when the lift arrives. "You didn't grow up there, so it hasn't hardened you that far."

He resettles the bag, and works his key in the lock, then reaches inside to activate the button that turned on the light, revealing a space that is neatly appointed and almost too clean to seem lived in.

No, he hadn't grown up there. Will had grown up in the middle of nowhere and had wanted to get out for as long as he could remember. He doesn't know if that makes him hard or resilient, but it certainly makes him determined. He offers a small smile and enters first, as bidden, there is no flourish, no dramatic presentation… it reminds Will a little of entering a hotel suite of someone visiting from out of town.

Everything is arranged in a way that it is meant to be, like a catalogue of a normal life. A small but comfortable kitchen with new appliances and nicely wiped down counters, a living area in dark colors with soft-looking furniture that appears to never have been sat it since the day it was delivered. Will licks his lips and takes off his coat, hanging it on the coat rack by the door, rubbing his hands together to warm them.

“And what did you find, when you dug to find out about me?” he knew he would be investigated when the shitstorm started, he’d prepared for it, but he wants to know how much of his cover had held up and how much he would have to explain away. It hits him rather hard, with the quiet click of the door, that in this space he is nothing, and he has nothing at all to help him if things go sour. He doubts the gun at his side would be effective beyond angering the man or acting as a prop for his own death.

"That you moved here only two months ago, " Hannibal says, and he sets the bag on the ground, puts his hat up on the top of the coat rack, and hangs his coat straight, before he frownes at it - they both had wet coats. He takes them both and settles them over one of the radiators instead, before he begins to bring the apartment to life.

He settles the bag on the counter, and wakes the electric range, pulls a stainless steel pan down from an overhead hook. "That you live in an undersized studio on the wrong side of town," Hannibal continues. "But I expect you'd almost rather it be a farm these days, having experienced the frustrations of city life."

Will listens to Hannibal talk and mentally checks off what of it is accurate and what had been fed to him. He seems to have gathered all the information provided, though it still worries him to have it told to him so blatantly. He swallows but offers a genuine smile when addressed directly again.

“The temperature between my apartment and the farm I grew up on is similar, I just wish the silence was similar also.” He replies, not denying anything. He doesn’t offer anything about Hannibal in return. In a way, this is going exactly as planned; he has the man’s attention, has his interest, and isn’t pushing hard enough to appear desperate or suspicious.

"There are silences in a city," Hannibal takes on the thread of conversation as easily as he can, while he continues on, producing a large pot in which to prepare handmade pasta that comes down from a shelf - it's clearly of an excellent quality white ribbons that will taste buttery under whatever sauce goes on them. "But the implications are usually not peaceful."

Hannibal washes his hands, and unpacks the meat to deal with it first. His kitchen is almost the most welcoming part of his house, allowing him to prepare on one side of the island counter that stands to divide it from the dining room, while on the other there are a row of tall, padded stools for others to occupy and converse. "And now I have learned that you entertain vendettas against police commissioners and your family lacked in some of the supportive qualities that are supposed to make this country so wholesome. I suppose that means you left home young."

Hannibal looks up to make eye contact and turn that into a question as he works expertly with a big knife, along the grain of well fatted pale meat - veal, which he is separating into thin

slices. He works carefully, but quickly. It would all come together to form a piccata, if Will was familiar enough. "Can you shuck scallops?"

The knife offered is a surprise, though, Will hasn't worked with sea food for a long time. His dinner is never this elaborate, he doubts it ever will be while he's working for the FBI.

"Perhaps once my hands aren't numb," he replies, standing and taking the offered utensil before walking around the kitchen island to turn on the tap in the sink and put his hands under the water, waiting for it to warm them and bring the slightly uncomfortable tingling to the tips of his fingers. He licks his bottom lip into his mouth before letting it go.

"Dinner cannot be your way of showing gratitude to everyone who does you a favor," he says, flicking his fingers of excess water before taking up a towel to dry them properly, "I'd imagine you would have quite a parade of people through here if that were the case. Was the commissioner really that much of a thorn in the side?"

Hannibal takes a towel over one hand and fires the valve on the radiator in the kitchen a little more firmly into the open position so that it will heat the space a little faster. Practically, he leaves them all on low while he is out, though the space is at least a little bit warmer than the outside - where the night has turned a brilliant reflective darkening gray, holding light longer with the swirling snowflakes to reflect it back.

The water runs hot on demand quickly, an expensive luxury, but still a practical one. It's likely that Hannibal has a hot shower as well, and any number of other subtleties that make things just a hair more pleasant. Hannibal is chopping by the time Will finishes washing his hands, though he pauses to uncork a bottle of wine, and pour both of them a glass.

"Enough of one that I expected he'd be taken care of by someone... expected." His answer is simple and elegant, and he offers a smile to suggest that was the entire truth. "And I suppose it's best to know the measure of someone who comes unpredictably into a situation. I was curious, Mr. Graham, I'll admit it."

In his more desperate moments, when following the man's movements and studying his… body of work… became too depressing, Will took up the man's hobbies to keep himself sane and on the same track as Hannibal. Jack didn't look kindly to someone who dropped behind on an assignment, especially one as important as this. So for weeks at a time, Will would spend his meagre pay on expensive ingredients and cook them, trying to understand what Hannibal found so pleasing about the activity beyond the obvious aftermath, and eating what he'd prepared.

He'd found it a hypnotic and rather pleasurable way to clear his mind. and now Will takes up the scallops in not so much a practiced way as in practiced anticipation, and begins to work.

"Did you have a vocation," Will asks, carefully working the delicate flesh from the shells, "Before this? You seem to have a gift for reading people."

At Quantico, Will had dabbled, taken all the classes available to check out the range, to see where he fit and what he enjoyed most. He found himself fascinated by people. Just people. The way they worked and thought and acted on those thoughts. He'd started honing in on his

ability to understand people and empathise, practiced with classmates and lecturers until it became almost second nature to be able to become someone else; like an actor. Like a double agent. Perhaps that had been why Jack had chosen him for the assignment, and not a more experienced agent, or even a more capable student from his own graduating year.

Will waits for his answer as he carefully continues running the knife around the edges of the shells, carefully but quick, wondering vaguely if his lack of experience – and age – will get him into trouble.

As it became easier, it became meditative. Hannibal could think while he prepared, and he enjoyed having the control over his own food that ensured the only variables were the ones he could see. He works with only the briefest of glances at Will when the other takes up the knife to begin prying open the scallop shells and separating the meat.

He knows already that Will knows some of the answer - and in a way that tempts him to toss in a blatant lie to see how long Will could play the game of fact and what he was supposed to know in his mind before he slipped up and had information he shouldn't technically know. But his willingness to pick up a knife and help in a way that was companionable earns him an easy truth.

"I was a medical student when the great war began," He says, after a careful sip of wine. It's clear he's separated the war from the rest of his mind in some careful way. "And then a field surgeon for the duration. I suppose I know a bit more about how people work than I'd like."

"And you? What's your profession?" The question is turned neatly, with a smile. It does not imply that Hannibal has totally finished talking about himself or that point in his life, but he doesn't want to go on and on about himself and risk boring someone (who already knows). "Not fisherman, I suppose."

He’s surprised Hannibal offers an honest answer, he expected a question turned back on himself, a subtle but clear elusion. He doesn’t offer more information, doesn’t give himself away by asking something Hannibal hasn’t explicitly told him. he finishes with the scallops and finds his hands in need of movement.

“Accounting,” Will offers in answer. It isn’t, really, far from the truth. His family had wanted him to go into accounting, he’d just blatantly ignored them to go into the FBI instead. “A profession my father assures me will never go out of fashion or demand.” He offers a thin smile and lets his eyes flick up to meet Hannibal’s for a moment.

“I refrain from telling him he’s confusing it with undertaking. Death is the only thing that’s constant and the only thing that will always have a flourishing business.”

He is almost painfully wary of everything around him, of how Hannibal prepares his own part of dinner near him in the kitchen, the fact that he has a knife that he can use far more effectively and accurately than Will could ever aspire to. He swallows. It also worries him that he’s here, and what’s expected of him. it’s unusual for Hannibal to bring anyone home, let alone a potential associate. Will doesn’t know if he’s expecting to be recruited, gutted or propositioned.

"It may go out of fashion perhaps, but demand - hmm. I expect not." But Hannibal runs his eyes over Will again, taking in the poorly fitting suit and the shoes that were slightly too worn. Not much of a shield against those who would question his profession, but he is young enough to fall back on the idea that he was only starting and they were still recovering from the depression.

Not that Hannibal appears to have noticed there ever was a depression. He'd arrived recently enough to stay uninvolved with it. He suspects Will's family was the sort that had starved in the dust bowl, and he felt too ashamed of suits to clothe himself in too nice of one when the cost could be compared to feeding a family for months.

Hannibal lets him fidget for the moment, watching the motions, watching him try to guess what was expected of him, and what he should be doing with his hands. It was revealing, to watch him when he lingered at a crossroads of decision. When he's finished chopping, the veal and other ingredients go into the heated pan with a decent amount of sweet cream butter and he presses them flat.

"What firm do you work for, Mr. Graham?" he asks, his tone interested. "You'll forgive me for saying it doesn't seem that they treat you well."

He glances over at the water and finds it boiling, but his hands are occupied. "Would it make me a terrible host to ask you to put the Fusilli in?"

“Heins & Whelen,” Will replies, quick enough to appear natural, not practiced. He’d recited his false backstory over and over to himself in the weeks leading up to actually orchestrating a meeting; My name is Will Graham, I am an accountant with Heins & Whelen, just starting out, no family left, absolutely nothing remarkable about me at all. “And they treat me well for a new employee. You’ve already made clear you’ve read up on me, knowing I moved here recently, I’m surprised you didn’t know.”

His smile is a challenge but not a malicious one. He’s not stupid enough to forget the man knows more about him than he probably lets on, and he won’t pretend to have forgotten in the role he’s playing. He follows Hannibal’s not-quite instruction and rinses his hands again, taking up the towel to dry them as he turns to lean his hip against the sink behind him. he hasn’t touched his wine.

“Anything else I can do to help the terrible host?” he asks casually, pushing to see how Hannibal would respond to a blatant step back from outright respect. Or, perhaps, to test if he has a sense of humor.

It is remarkable for exactly how unremarkable it is, given the man's more immediate history. One did not expect an otherwise unremarkable accountant to beat someone quite so violently out of nowhere at all. He wonders how Will would come around to explaining that, or if he would just let it sit as the single standout.

"I know what I've been told," Hannibal agrees smoothly, "but also what I can see. Your shoes are old for an accountant - or at least one that's well treated by their firm. I know you went to an excellent school where you must have rubbed shoulders with the elite, but you got in on the merit of your mind, rather than family money."

But these are physical things, tangible things. Hannibal smiles apologetically in return to the challenging one. All in the way the man dressed, and that was it. There was a lot that could be found out just by looking, rather than what was reported.

Hannibal looks appreciative, glad the man followed instructions carefully but without lunging to it too eagerly. Will is interested in knowing him, but not being owned by Hannibal. It is refreshing, and an interesting, indirect way of going about attempting an infiltration and takedown. "Thank you," Hannibal answers graciously, but with a smile. "That should do."

He leaves the pan to sit and begins to attend the scallops Will had prepared, rinsing twice, and then settling them over the boiling pasta in a catch basket to steam and starch at the same time. Then, Hannibal leans back to breathe and wash his hands and takes his wine glass back up, observing that Will's remained full. "Do you prefer white, or are you of the belief that abstaining solves the world's issues?"

Will doesn't want to admit that it's partially because he was worried there was something in it and partially because he doesn't drink on the job. He simply offers a smile and takes up the glass to hold but not to drink.

"I'm not a huge drinker," he admits; truth, to contrast the false history and job. "I'm afraid that I was never taught an appreciation for finer wine and my schooling provided more negative than positive experiences with alcohol." Prohibition had ensured that someone would try to make their own alcohol or smuggle some in. They tried. Multiple times. And it had been horribly made and revolting and completely not worth the hangover in the morning. Will had learned quickly and hadn't touched the stuff since unless under duress or for a cover. The way Hannibal is looking at him suggests he's on the verge of teaching Will the meaning and appreciation of 'fine' alcohol. Or fine everything.

With a sigh, Will takes a tentative sip. The rest of Hannibal's analysis of him had quite given him pause for the moment, just thinking. He could read him as well as Will could read him in turn, and it was unnerving, having that power turned back on himself.

"American schools do seem to have that fallacy in common," Hannibal allows - but he doesn't quite relent with his gaze until Will has a sip. There is nothing in it - he had uncorked the bottle in front of the man, after all, and killing someone in his own apartment was bad form. He'd avoid it unless he was defending himself. "It's not the same as it was those years ago, Mr. Graham. And I wouldn't insult you by offering anything less than something pleasing."

Bathtub gin it is not, it's complex and vaguely sweet but dry. It does not hit the mouth hard like bathtub gin, it doesn't scour the throat. It's unlikely Will has ever encountered a vintage of the like, given his professed lack of education on the subject. Hannibal smiles once Will has had some, as if that were all he was asking.

"My mind seems to be the only marketable thing about me," Will says at length, letting his eyes linger on the stovetop a moment before sliding to Hannibal, again keeping eye contact with his hands to read his responses for the time being.

“Which begs the question of why I’m here.” He turns his chin up as casually as he lifts the glass to his lips again.

Hannibal moves to turn the veal over in the pan - he does not fuss with his cooking or hover over it. He has a sort of confidence that allows him to set it as he wants it and know how it will emerge again from the other side.

"Because I am grateful," Hannibal reiterates, once he's given the scallops a toss and glanced once down at the pasta below them. He supposes he needs more, and the adage about 'enemies closer' springs into his mind and brings a smile that touches all the way up into his eyes. "And cautious. You should allow that your sudden appearance might seem suspicious, if in fact, you were interested at all in what could be done for you if you continued to look after our interests, Mr. Graham. I thought before you met anyone important I would sound you out."

He admits it casually, but does not overplay his hand, and then he judges the veal as done as he'd like it and pushes it to a cool burner, shakes the scallops again and at last begins to fetch down some plates as the pasta finishes, but for as busy as he is, he is still watching Will from the corners of his eyes, trying to see how he will sweat this accomplishment.

Will accepts that, inclines his head as he thinks. So they are interested in him, he did make the impression he wanted. And just as Hannibal doesn’t overplay his hand, Will does the same.

“And how do I sound?” he asks, setting his glass aside and offering to help set the table, taking direction carefully but taking his time to study the rest of the apartment as he works. It’s quiet here and the view quite spectacular. He wonders how Hannibal assumes he can ‘look after their interests’ more. He’s not a hitman, it’s fairly obvious that he has neither the build nor the countenance. In fact it took him three attempts to pass for his gun license at the academy. He doubts they’d need him in actual accounting – and he is well versed in the practice, his father made sure of it – and that leaves very few things they could need him for.

When the table is set he leans against it, just watching the city pass by and letting himself meditate until Hannibal moves behind him and startles him into shifting. He takes up his glass from the kitchen and follows the man to the table.

The view is excellent, all the way up here. It's the twenty fourth floor, luxurious and well-appointed and very high up - the whole city laid out flat below them, her secrets and streets open to the eyes. It is hypnotic, Hannibal enjoys the view profoundly, looking down and discovering how many lives he actually owns of the ones ticking through their elaborate clockwork.

He does not interrupt Will's considerations, not until the table is fully set and ready, with scallops and veal piccata over a thick homemade pasta. It isn't his nationality, not hardly, but it hasn't hurt him thus far to play into the stereotype.

"I haven't quite decided yet," Hannibal admits at length, as he holds the chair for Will to settle himself into. "I'm not certain you're even interested."

He serves them both, but there is plenty. He knows, in the back of his mind, that Will is unlikely to eat well, not with his thoughts for rent and his pet and the pay he gets from the FBI. He doesn't suppose that Will Graham is the sort that could be bought over heart and soul with money - or he'd have become an accountant.

"Are you, Mr. Graham?"

Will sits and takes up his cutlery carefully, smiling at his dinner. It's very lavish, much more than he expected if he'd come home to his dog like he'd planned. He didn't eat anything more elaborate than potatoes or rice with meat – if he could afford it – or just vegetables – if he couldn't buy dog food that week. This was… something else.

At Hannibal's words he looks up, meeting his eyes with a genuinely amused expression. Both are men of power in their own right, Hannibal runs most of the east coast trafficking ring singlehandedly, despite refusing to take credit for doing so, and Will… Will has his attention. Neither will shift or budge and both know what the answer is.

"I can be tempted." He tells him honestly, starting on his dinner and closing his eyes in enjoyment. It tastes divine, the flavors mixing in unusual but rather pleasing ways, invoking memory of the wine that Will takes up again after a few bites of dinner. It's a quiet and comfortable silence, surprisingly, and Will begins to relax; shoulders lowering from their tense state of wariness, eyes still looking out for any sudden or unusual movement that would indicate he needs to move or defend himself.

There's nothing.

Just occasional glances shared over the best meal Will has had in months.

Hannibal has some notion of how to coax someone so obviously starving as Will Graham. He is wondering if the shoddiness of suit and shoes was intentional, idly, and he decides he doesn't care. It had been well played if it was, and sloppy of the FBI if it wasn't, to invoke what little humanity Hannibal had ever so carefully. But much as he knew the measure of this man financially, Will Graham held his head up high and refused to whinge or scrape or beg Hannibal for favors.

The corner of Hannibal's mouth quirks, and he actually wonders how deep the statement goes - if Will Graham could be tempted right out of his original loyalty, and to instead eat from Hannibal's outstretched hand. A nervous racehorse led from the stables and painted black, no one would really ever know who truly won until the race was run and the color washed away to reveal that perhaps it was something entirely unexpected.

It's allowed to be comfortable, how they eat. Companionable. The food is excellent, and Hannibal doesn't dishonor it in the slightest by speaking until he's appreciated most of it. "It so happens I need an assistant," he says, the hand extended with the sugar cube balanced in the palm, to see how eager he might be to eat. He arches his eyebrows and tips his head. "I would need you to wear a better suit."

It's delivered with a smile, a faint drift of humor, before Hannibal passes his knife through the meat on his plate again to separate it into something smaller, and he watches Will consider as

he works it between his teeth, and wonders how far he can push this man before he breaks and admits what he is.

Will pauses before carefully swallowing his mouthful and setting his knife and fork down, just resting his wrists against the edge of the table for the moment. Then he clears his throat.

“And perhaps a haircut,” he says finally, sitting up a little straighter and finishing his wine in a smooth long drink. Assistant. He didn’t expect to get that close that quick. Perhaps one of the lower runners, an organizer at most, nothing like this. It is both oddly suspicious and strangely… natural. He considers the empty glass and rolls it between his fingers before biting his lip lightly, eyes narrowed in thought.

“What would my job entail?” he asks.

Hannibal's eyes travel up toward the unruly mop, somewhat longer than was currently fashionable, by way of concession. He hopes the man won't cut all of it away, while it could stand to be neater, the curling fringe wasn't unattractive. Hannibal allows that deviancy in himself, on occasion, to influence his decisions. It is a weakness he could afford to indulge.

"And perhaps a haircut," he agrees, smoothly, before he lifts his fork to his mouth again, and drops his attention away from his dinner guest.

"It would mostly involve book keeping, Mr. Graham. I find it dull, but necessary. I am exacting and demanding on that front, I will admit," he says, dangling the temptation to look into his finances in front of the FBI agent as casually as that. He will, of course, be only dealing with the official records - and let him try to find a hole in those that went down deep enough to threaten Hannibal.

"But also errands of a personal nature, if you don't consider yourself above retrieving dry cleaning and making the occasional delivery that I would require to be just-so?" Hannibal sets his silverware down exactingly, at ten and two on his plate, and folds his hands together to look appraisingly at Will. "The rewards would be palpable, as I'm sure you've guessed, and I would be most grateful for the intelligent company - since you suggest it is your mind that is most marketable."

Will mirrors the cutlery placement, adjusting how his own is lying by gently shifting it with a forefinger. He would have access to almost everything the FBI needed for the rico case. All the finances, meaning all the companies and leaders attached to the finances. It was perfect. If all he needed to do for that was be vigilant and organized, wear better tailored suits and occasionally retrieve dry cleaning Will is fairly certain he could and would do it.

It could make his career, bringing down Hannibal Lecter.

“The suggestion will continue being just as true later as it is now,” he assures him, offering another smile, allowing part of his wall to sink and reveal the sheer excitement he is feeling. Cover or no cover, any man offered such a position by one Hannibal Lecter would be doing one of two things: on their knees thanking their lucky stars or running like hell. This was the closest to the equivalent of the former that Will would allow.

“I would need a day or two to familiarize myself with the paperwork before I could guarantee flawless and fast delivery,” he says, being realistic, “But perhaps the position would benefit us both.”

"I'm assuming you'll need to give Heins & Whelen your notice as well," Hannibal says, with a smile that he allows to be open as Will finds his outward and inward purposes aligning in a way that should possibly set off his alarm bells. But he has to play along now, regardless - to rebuff Hannibal's advances here would cut him out of the opportunity, no matter how it might tweak him as too easy.

That he steps up into it anyway and does not let his facade drop for one minute into panic, instead playing the easy, quick to anger Will Graham to the hilt. He does not overdo it. Hannibal respects him in a marginally larger increment, even as the hook sets for him to begin reeling the man in.

He arches his eyebrows at the implication lent to the last words with the addition of 'but', as if Will were suggesting more to it than Hannibal's gratitude and requirements allowing for a lucky happenstance that would benefit William with his doting employment. "Perhaps?" he asks, allowing Will to fill in the blank, wondering what exactly he'll offer.

Will realizes his error and shrugs, just blinking a moment. “I’ve been starved for intelligent company also.” He replies easily, a feign but a quick one. He’d let his mind run too quickly and his mouth follow along; he isn’t even sure if he was implying anything in particular with his last words, or simply trying to end the statement as carefully as possible.

He refrains from asking what more the man would ask of him, certain the answer would jostle his carefully arranged mask into something weaker. And he’s doing very well right now, he doesn’t need to lose this.

It’s difficult to not make his leave taking – or the onset of it – anything but awkward, and Will takes a moment before glancing to Hannibal for cues on whether or not he’s allowed to leave or – again his mind refrains – more is required of him. Eventually he stands, gathering his plate and offering to take Hannibal’s. It’s something to do with his hands if anything, a distraction to clear his head and get it back on properly.

Hannibal takes his own plate graciously, though he had seen the way William had taken a leap to get himself back on course, he knows the man is likely eager to report his progress back, or perhaps to take his leave of his cover corporation and angle himself better into a position to work both sides. Hannibal is genuinely curious where William's loyalties will fall.

"It is late," he agrees, and he takes Will's plate as well, heading for the sink. The plates are both devoid of remains, and Hannibal is appreciative that the other had eaten everything he'd offered. He considers pushing another glass of wine on the man, but there is something to be said for taking things one careful step at a time. "Let me call your cab, Mr. Graham. I expect to see you tomorrow morning, at your leisure, so that we can get you into proper attire."

He settles the plates down into a basin of hot water, and moves for the phone - but before he does, he pours another glass of wine for the both of them. Will won't be driving after all, and it would leave a taste on the man's tongue that would linger as he shivered next to his dog in

his tiny apartment, likely unable to sleep for the certainty that he would soon entangle Hannibal Lecter in his carefully cast net.

Will accepts the wine, albeit reluctantly, and politely takes a sip. He isn't sure what time it is, but he's wired, adrenaline shooting through his veins at the prospect of what is to come. He doubts he'll sleep the night but he's worked more on less rest and he knows his story and Hannibal's well enough to be confident in it. Perhaps he should worry about his mouth running away from him again, but his save seemed appropriate enough to not arouse suspicion.

"Thank you," he murmurs, for dinner, certainly, the wine, perhaps even for the cab, but more for the opportunity. It feels like a betrayal to be thanking the man for unknowingly starting the domino effect that will end his entire empire, but Will feels it impolite to leave the gratitude unsaid. He listens to Hannibal call a cab – a company usually far too expensive for Will to afford – and the wine takes less time to disappear than the first glass did, feeling it seep into his bones and blood and fuel an engine for something new.

"I'm thanking you, remember?" Hannibal responds once the Cab is on the way, in their last few minutes. He smiles graciously, the picture of a perfect host, as he drinks in a companionable slouch against the edge of the kitchen counter, watching William mirror his motions and pace perhaps unintentionally. "I hope to keep you pleasantly inclined to my gratitude."

His voice holds just the faintest deeper suggestion of meaning, before he finishes his glass and escorts Will Graham downstairs, letting him wonder on the subject as Will slips into Hannibal's net and curls into it without the faintest struggle, the way he settles into the back of the warm cab, and lets Hannibal pay his faire.

"Keep warm, William," he says by way of goodbyes, and he watches the cab drive off through a faint haze of his own steaming breath.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

No warnings for this chapter. Plot development, character development, and suits.

Chapter Notes

This is one of our shorter ones; next week is super plot-heavy and rather wonderful, so stay tuned!~

Predictably, Will doesn't sleep. He paces, he goes over his reviews and reports again and again and he can't stop smiling. It's a ridiculous, easy, stupid grin that he knows he'll have to suppress once the sun is up but he lets it free now. His dog watches him, confused, from his place at the foot of his bed, confused as to why his master isn't trying to keep warm and resting like he should be.

It's very early morning when Will realizes that he and Hannibal never named a time to meet, nor a place. It had been such a fleeting arrangement that Will hadn't bothered to confirm. He leaves the apartment far too early and catches a cab to the suburb an hour away, where he won't – he hopes – be tracked. He finds a payphone and phones his results in, masking the conversation as one to his mother, code words mingled with the mindless chatter about the weather and his dog. He hangs up, smile still very evident, and catches the bus back, and past his apartment on his way to Hannibal's.

He wears his best suit today, still not something remotely close to what Hannibal would consider proper, but at least he doesn't feel as underdressed as he had the night before at dinner. And he didn't make the mistake of forgetting the scarf today.

The sun is up but no warmth is forthcoming, nonetheless, Will waits another hour before making his way into the building and to the lift, thumbing the appropriate button and waiting as it takes him to the most exciting moment of his life. It's pathetic, really, in a way to associate excitement with meeting one of the most dangerous people on the east coast, but Will can barely contain it. He's close. He's already closer than he could possibly hope to be, and he's prepared for anything that may underlie the too-easy in he's gotten himself.

Hannibal doesn't have to witness the call on Graham's end to know that it happens. His tail tells him that it happened anyway, and Hannibal politely thanks the man, suggesting that he could keep tabs on their over enthusiastic mole while the man was in his company without any further help.

The morning is bright and clear and Hannibal has slept the deep, satisfied sleep that popular expression would suggest is no right of someone so wicked. He has called his haberdasher to create an appointment. If Will Graham was to accompany him, there was a need for him to look well appointed. He had suggested 'at your convenience', but he knows the man will be there early, and if not eager - careful to impress.

Hannibal will be suitably impressed. Enough to keep him on the line. He answers the door and the smell of freshly made, outlandishly expensive coffee wafts free with the warm air from inside, and even early as it is, he is as impeccably dressed as Will Graham has tried to be. His expression softens at the attempt, into another one of his genuine, disarming smiles. "Better," he says, by way of greeting, and then. "Good morning, Mr. Graham. There is coffee, if you'd like. The haberdasher doesn't expect us for an hour and a half, so please come in and enjoy it."

He steps back from the door, and then politely takes Will's scarf and coat, though there is still no hat and the windblown snow lingering from last night has settled into Will's hair attractively. Hannibal notices, but keeps it to himself. It will melt soon enough. "Were they reluctant to let you go?"

Will reins in his grin to something more appropriate and surrenders his scarf and coat to the man with a grateful incline of his head and a returned greeting. The coffee smells divine and much better than the stuff Will had spent all night drinking to stay awake. He is less quick, however, to accept that invitation. He takes his time reacquainting himself with the apartment again, letting his eyes take the space in when it’s bathed in daylight, and chooses to answer Hannibal’s last question first.

“They were displeased with the short notice,” he replies, “But I doubt they’ll miss a junior accountant, we’re a dime a dozen.”

He glances down at his suit and feels his smile soften. This is the best suit he’s ever owned, had ever hoped of owning, and it’s nothing compared to what he assumes awaits him if Hannibal’s calm amused tone is anything to go by. There’s something… saddening about surrendering this part of himself, this genuine part of himself. But it’s a small sacrifice, considering.

He doesn’t ask where the money is coming from to pay for his new attire, his new mask. He assumes it will come from his pay if he proves himself worthy of the new position, or as a pound of flesh if he doesn’t. he walks slowly through the corridor and into the main room before the smell and allure of coffee is just too tempting and he gravitates towards it, accepting a cup when Hannibal passes him one.

And small talk seems more awkward without the cloak of night to smooth away any rough edges and failed attempts, so Will keeps quiet, unsure what one would ask such a powerful man, and not yet clear on how he should – and would – address his new employer.

"We'll be sure your references are in order," Hannibal promises, in a way that implies it was a joke. Very few moved on from a comfortable position within the family, aside from into some other position within it. There was almost as much upward movement as lateral. And of course the benefits were top class.

He thinks perhaps, if Will Graham was actually an accountant, they might miss him. He wonders, however, in this case if they'd ever even met him. He wonders how solid the cover would hold if he were to reach in and shake it. He's betting that it would. Will Graham has his bases covered.

Hannibal wants him to see himself in the position, however, he wants the position to slide over Graham easy, like a second skin. Like the suit that will fit him - and this, he could see, this suit the man had pride in. He had earned it, and it was more than some men ever would have.

He fixes coffee to William's specifications, and recovers his own cup which he'd been in the process of drinking. "I find friends make better business partners, in my line of work," He suggests, cautiously. "Would it bother you if I suggested we be on a first name basis?"

Will blinks before taking a long slow sip of his drink. His name is the only thing he hasn't changed in his cover, because it's common. There is most certainly more than one Will Graham in America. But it hadn't occurred to him that he would be addressed any way but formally; he knows Hannibal well enough through his associates to understand what is being offered is unusual for him.

"Considering how intimately we'll be working, I'd say it's inevitable." Will replies, enjoying his coffee more, than he thinks, he has the right to enjoy any drink, "A man's finances say a lot about a person, Hannibal,"

The name doesn't roll off his tongue yet, not easily. It takes some work to get it pronounced properly and comfortably, even though he's been using the man's name for months, in writing, in delivering his reports… just never to his face, and there's something odd about that, something strangely close to friendly, when addressing someone by their name, that Will suddenly feels a little lighter.

Hannibal smiles appreciatively at how quickly Will can adapt. He has no need to correct himself, though it's plain the name sounds oddly to Will's own ears. It's unusual enough that there's nothing to hold against William for that.

He sips his own coffee, standing comfortably in the kitchen and watching Will try and settle into the space while Hannibal keeps changing the dimensions ever so slightly. It's amusing, entertaining. "It's true that you can tell a lot by a man's checkbook, but rarely the entire dimensions of his soul."

Straightening, Hannibal beckons Will to follow him, so that he can know the dimensions of Hannibal's apartment - specifically the office, where William will be spending part of his time. Friends close... accountants closer still. Hannibal knows his records are immaculate, that William will slowly run himself to frustrated extremes trying to find what he needs in them, and he will find that they simply don't exist, not anywhere that could be tied back to Hannibal, anyway. Perhaps not outside of Hannibal's own immaculate mental tallies.

Past the kitchen and dining spaces, the apartment opens out wide, the ceiling rises up and away and the space reveals itself as a loft, with a tiny spiral stair leading up to what must be his sleeping area tucked away above the foremost half of the apartment. If the view in the

dining room was hypnotic, here the floor to ceiling windows span three times the height of a man, wide panes that left you feeling almost overwhelmed along one wall of the office, and the rest tastefully appointed with shelves that are heavy with books, art that does not sit heavy on the eyes, and some statuary.

"Will this suit you as a working space?" he asks mildly into Will Graham's clear awe, "Or should I arrange other accommodations?

If a man is his castle, then Hannibal is a man appearing open to others and holding secrets buried deeper in. a man who enjoys playing it close to the chest, everything, it seems, if he's wanting his assistant and accountant to work in his apartment and yet still dress for the nines. Will can't help being awed and impressed, it's an impressive place, and the question makes him blink, confused, for a moment.

"It's certainly a change from Heins & Whelen," Will admits, somewhat breathless still. He doesn't ask if Hannibal will be around for when he's working, he doubts the man would leave him alone in the apartment at any given time, too much he could find if he looked closely enough, and if he were ever to offer Will knows he would need to get out of there fast and burn the paths behind him.

The word accommodation is what gets his mind twisting in a strange, not completely unpleasant way. He thinks back to his cold apartment with his empty fridge and broken lock. And his dog. And then he lets his mind return to this place, this lavish, warm, huge expanse of space that he's been allowed to work in and escape to – ironically. Yet 'accommodation' still has the lingering second meaning Will can't set aside, and it's that, more than anything, that makes him straighten his shoulders just that little bit more.

"It will more than suffice," he answers, unsure, yet, if he should thank Hannibal or act nonchalant, as casual as Hannibal was when he offered something so grand. Will wonders if he'll ever get used to it.

Hannibal offers a wry smile at how obviously impressed Will is, at how clearly tempted and possibly pleased, if Hannibal is doing what he intends. For now, he lets Will think that the majority of his work will be here, that Hannibal will not expect his accompaniment everywhere to keep track of monetary assets. He knows the best way to throw William off the track enough to start reeling him in is to make him question what he thought he knew about Hannibal.

"It's something better than the corner office one usually aspires to," Hannibal agrees, moving toward the window and looking down into the city, with the toes of his shoes against the glass so the height could almost threaten to dizzy him. The windows were as transparent and impenetrable as the cover he'd built - it worked a hundred percent legally, there was no way to tie him into what he ran - if people chose to pay more on the record for the products and services that came tied back to him, well. He provided extreme quality, and prided himself on it.

"The wash room is in the back, files and records in the other door," he explains, invitingly. A thousand surface trails that led nowhere but what was fair and legal. "And of course you've seen the kitchen and dining room."

Turning away from the window, Hannibal draws up next to a standing statue of an elk stag, and he touches it absently as he draws straight. "I expect you to keep track of my appointments and accompany me when I ask, and to handle the cleaning which you will find upstairs in the canvas bag marked 'to press'. I'll point out the cleaners to you on our way. Are these terms all acceptable?"

Will listens and nods, absently sipping his coffee as he mentally catalogues everything in his mind. where one door is, where another stands a little open, he'll need to leave the place as he found it, as Hannibal leaves it, so that anything he isn't supposed to do, but does, will go unnoticed. He has faith it will work, and has defenses planned for if it doesn't; Will has an excellent memory.

"Quite," he replies at length, a smile underlying the mock-clipped tone to ensure Hannibal he isn't backing out, isn't stringing him along only to reject the offer. He would be a dead man if he tried. He doesn't ask about pay, or about the rewards he can expect joining the lucrative dangerous business. He doesn't care, and his cover would care less. Accountant Will Graham was never in it for the money, FBI Will Graham only needs enough for a Rico case. Riding high on his own success thus far, Will doesn't believe he'll be in the business long enough to be remembered.

"For a man so busy, I'm surprised you don't have an assistant already, Hannibal." He tells him, fiddling with the mug and letting his eyes travel to the enormous windows again, meditating on the view, "Or did they lack the marketability of being mentally stimulating?"

Hannibal expects him to rifle what he has, he expects the man to try and find holes in his defenses. The beauty of it will be if Will Graham does, Hannibal will know it. He will know how to close them. He needs to see himself through Will Graham, and he knows that he can use the man as much as the other seeks to use him. That he can turn the tables.

And it will be interesting, because Will Graham is almost clever enough to be a worry. If anyone can penetrate through - it's like to be him. But at the same time, if anyone can penetrate back into Will Graham and turn him around into something Hannibal can use instead... Hannibal has some faith in his own abilities. And he could always kill the man, if all of it proved impossible.

"I haven't found one suited. I have tried a few," he does not elaborate as to their ultimate fate. "But I've come to the conclusion that I'll have to hire out of house to get exactly what I want." He tilts his head and smiles cryptically, and then has a glance at his watch. "It's best to start from the foundations, William, and harder to do that if they've already been laid incorrectly."

He beckons, pausing to turn down the heat to a trickle before they leave, and he retrieves Will's coat to hold it up for him to slip into politely. "But I won't say your point is one I haven't weighed. I doubt I could stand to work closely with someone I didn't find interesting."

Will follows, eyes still darting around the apartment, lingering on the spiral stairs longer than necessary before setting his mug on the counter and following Hannibal to the door. It feels strange being so close to the man, not because it happened so quickly but because Will feels comfortable there. In another life, perhaps, Will would have made quite a name for himself in this business. In this life, however, Will's moral code would invert if he tried.

He gives Hannibal a grateful look and takes his time untangling his scarf before winding it around his neck. It’s a long, worn, warm thing and a comfort. Will decides he’ll need to sleep this evening if he has any hope of making progress on the files and further into Hannibal’s trust when he officially starts his new job. He’d made it clear on the phone that morning that he wouldn’t be in touch for a while, not until he found something. He assumes, rightly, that he’s going to be watched very carefully in the next few weeks.

They make their way to the lift and Will can’t help notice how Hannibal is watching him, in a way that suggests he’s trying to see right down to his bones, see if the marrow is the color he desires. It’s both unnerving and strangely empowering, and Will doesn’t do anything to acknowledge the fact that he noticed, just files it away to think over later. Perhaps if Hannibal is so deeply fascinated with Will himself he can use that as a distraction, to his advantage.

There are times when it's good to question just how far one was from a theory of another life. If it might ever become possible to pass through it, and find it on the other side. Here, Hannibal allows him to live it almost fully. There is only the safety net, and he is sure that the man will keep on the high wire at least for some time, long enough to get a feel for it.

Especially when he ushers William into his private car, after bidding the doorman a pleasant good morning. The car crouches, waiting, the driver sits impassively behind the wheel while Hannibal directs him, and only spares Will the barest of second glances. It's certainly not the same way Hannibal addresses his gaze onto Will.

"My preferred cleaner is just up Park, where it intersects with Lancaster," Hannibal informs, and he points it out when they pass - a building with a neon sign that's warmed its way through the snow covering it, and bright red and white striped awnings to keep the damp off of anyone entering. It announces 'Clearview', clearly.

"You'll forgive my tailor his eccentricities," Hannibal explains in advance, with a faint smile that suggests that perhaps this will be a unique experience for Will. "Or you will, when you see the results, anyway."

Will notes where the streets intersect, figures that in winter it would be safer and more efficient to get a cab there instead of walking. It looks like a surprisingly normal place, nothing elaborate or expensive, and he supposes that’s the best way to stay off the radar for someone like Hannibal. Still, it’s a nice surprise.

He would perhaps get a cab once before Hannibal insisted that his car was there to be used for the betterment of his business endeavors. It was the sort of kindness and luxury that would be remembered. The sort that could leave a favorable impression.

At Hannibal’s words, he turns his head and quirks a smile. He’s forgiven the man’s subtle gentle pushing, he’s certain he can forgive someone measuring him for a suit.

“Perhaps I’ll need to see the results,” he agrees, keeping the conversation light. He assumes he’ll get one suit, perhaps two, so he can always look the way Hannibal needs him too if he’s accompanying him or representing him in any way. Will worked through college, he’s done far worse than pick up occasional dry cleaning. Just never for the likes of Hannibal Lecter.

Smiling gently at William's careful acceptance of what the tailor would be like, sight unseen, pleases Hannibal. Here was a man who knew when not to fuss. Perhaps it was a pleasant act, now, the novelty of allowing someone you intended to remove pamper him, but Hannibal knows that somewhere in his nights alone it might just rub him the wrong way just so.

“Did you have plans for me for the rest of the day?” Will inquires as the car slows for a traffic light. Hannibal never told him when he’d be starting or with what, and Will is fairly sure his coffee buzz will run out mid-afternoon and he’ll crash in the worst way if something particularly difficult is required of him. like meeting people.

"No, though I thought you might want a chance to glance through the books this afternoon," He suggests, knowing full well that William had slept poorly the evening before by how early he'd arrived at Hannibal's office after his early morning report. "I trust you to keep your own hours so that you will provide your best output."

Hannibal is forgiving with talent. He finds leniency, with a very specific set, yielded the best results under the pressure of their own drive to do well and to be perceived to do well. The car slows and stops, allowing them out in front of the promised menswear store, displaying several immaculately tailored suits in the window. As they exit the car, Hannibal looks at William measuringly, and then guides him inside.

It’s then it dawns on Will that he will have almost unlimited access to Hannibal’s apartment, his paperwork, his entire life if he chooses to twist his investigation in such a way. It would be manipulative and underhanded but so is the man Will is dealing with. Perhaps being under cover makes it easier to play the qualities out, knowing that in a way he’s not accepting them himself, nor acting on them.

It’s a cheap trick, but it helps Will keep what part of his conscience he thinks will survive the assignment. He nods and offers another smile.

“I’ll be sure not to inconvenience you at unusual times,” he promises. He hopes he doesn’t come across Hannibal with company either. In his research he failed to find anyone associated with Hannibal romantically or even just sexually. If they existed, men, women, they did not exist on record. It was thoroughly unnerving and he forces his mind away, to the here and now, instead.

The store isn’t large but it’s difficult to ignore. The displays are eyecatching and beautiful, and Will feels – again – severely out of his league. At least he has the sense not to have his jaw hanging open, but his eyes are wide and he is impressed as much as he is intimidated. Inside it’s elegant and quiet, a place that looks as clean as it feels, and oddly doesn’t offer the atmosphere of a place any man can enter into. It’s welcoming, alluring almost, teasing those who enter with the promise of great things if they were to spend their money here.

This is certainly the place Will imagines Hannibal frequenting.

"You might find I keep irregular hours myself, William," He smiles, appreciative that the man seemed considerate. He supposes Graham would have tried to find his personal life as well - he would have seen nothing obvious, and digging would have revealed even more frustrations. Hannibal was a firm believer in keeping his private life utterly private.

Given the theoretical legal penalties, were he not in quite a league of his own, it's wise. The known policy of the police to fish for men of his persuasion by luring them to proposition officers was not the way Hannibal intended to allow himself to be captured. So instead he is certain that his lapses are invisible, untraceable.

It is why he will lead and tease but rely on William to make the first move if there are any to be made at all. Otherwise, he will satisfy himself with being certain the man is well appointed. There is something to be said for having pleasant diversions to look at.

Hannibal notes he at least holds himself composed, as he introduces William to his tailor, a diminutive Asian with round spectacles and eyes that run over William like he were a slab of meat, raking every line of him with clear attention before he unloops the tape from around his neck and begins to take William's measurements, heedless of how intimate his knuckles and fingers find themselves.

Hannibal stays out of the way, though he is reaching up to touch pieces of smooth expensive broadcloth as he considers cool grays and stripes, and he watches William carefully to see how he endures the handsy assault.

Will makes a surprised sound of discomfort but doesn't say anything as the man measures everything. Everything Will did not think ever needed to be measured for a suit. He resolutely doesn't look at Hannibal and instead concentrates on the shop around them, letting his eyes skim the fabric on display. After a while – once the more obscure measurements have been taken – Will finds himself relaxing into the experience.

Hannibal is silent, and Will has nothing to say to the man working on making him appear presentable, so the only sounds are the occasional car outside and the tailor's chatter to himself when he's making notes or choosing colors. Will runs his fingers through his hair and remembers – belatedly perhaps – that he needs a haircut as well. Perhaps this evening. Perhaps tomorrow. He tugs the curls absently before he's instructed to step behind a screen and change.

As frantic as the man's working appears to be, it's oddly calming, and Will lets his mind wander. To what he could look for – he doubts Hannibal has been sloppy in his book keeping – in the finances to link Hannibal to at least one of the organizations he's running, even the smallest link will be a link more than anything they've had previously. He sits on the stool provided and rests his head in his hands a moment, exhausted but determined to not show it once he's back in full view.

Hannibal lays three bolts down on the man's counters, one in traditional black, one in a dove gray pinstripe, and the last in a brown check. His tailor corrects the last when he is done taking Will's measurements (and briefly altering the suit Will was wearing with a clucking sound that suggested extreme disapproval), taking the brown check away for one in a different shade while Hannibal watches in bemusement.

In the end, Hannibal defers to the man's judgment.

"You come back tomorrow for gray," the tailor informs Hannibal in sharp tones meant for business. "Other two in a week."

He shoots a dirty look at the suit he'd altered as William emerges wearing it, but it is tucked at the waist now, sits more pleasantly on his shoulders and the pants no longer rucked up at the ankles over Will's shoes. "Don't wear that in week."

Hannibal is waiting when William emerges again, with one of the fashionable small brimmed fedoras of the age balanced in his hands, which he passes over in silent instruction. "You'll have one to pick up tomorrow," he relays. "But for now you aren't quite so obvious. Are you satisfied with three?"

Will's eyes widen a little. Three. Three fully tailored, impeccable suits along with the one that's been altered for him. He already feels more overdressed than he has ever felt, and he takes the hat carefully before adjusting it in front of one of the full-length mirrors over his hair. He smiles. He doesn't cut half a bad silhouette in an adjusted suit.

"Three would suit me well, thank you" he informs him, turning and cocking his head a little, silently seeking approval. He feels like a stereotype and it takes a lot of willpower to not smile at that. He's certain three will be enough, he'll take his cues from Hannibal for how often to wear one suit or another and when to wear each. He tries not to catch the tailor's eyes in the mirror, his warning alone was enough to make Will cower.

There's something about powerful men in their own domain that Will envies. Even tiny Asian men in a suit shop; the man certainly knows how to command people in his space, if Hannibal's silence is anything to go by. It's impressive. He thanks him but gets a scoff in reply, so instead offers a slightly helpless smile to Hannibal from under the hat before walking closer, hands in his pockets and feeling how the suit works around him as he moves. It's strangely comfortable.

Hannibal watches him settle the hat on, and he appreciates the view as William settles it more comfortably on his head. As he shifts and turns and admires his own profile in the mirror. The slope of the suit's back is a long, neat line now, and Hannibal lets his eyes trail the outline smoothly, thanking his tailor internally for knowing how best to flatter the powerful male figure.

He looks excellent. Hannibal knows that will make a very specific statement to not only the rest of the family, but to William's handlers. It might be just enough to make them feel nervous. Hannibal considers the hat at the angle he's presented, and then adjusts it just a hair. After a moment, he nods.

"And the hat," he informs the tailor, who writes a series of figures on a tablet of paper with a short pencil, which he offers to Hannibal, and is ultimately confirmed without a single noise of protest. Hannibal writes the man a check, and then they are free to go.

"I insist my representatives are well appointed," he explains himself, as they exit the shop, and turn up the street to where the car still waits. "I find that it's a better reflection of myself. I don't mean to treat you as an accessory, but - others will judge me when they come into my home, based on how you appear. That's just part of the politics. So very much of what I do is tiresome politics, William."

Hannibal smiles again, just this shy of tempting. "It seems to please you, at least. There is a lot a good suit can do for the bearing."

Will notes the tone, the way it seems to lament the amount of bullshit he has to deal with on a daily basis, with the position he holds. Will is sure a lot of it – if not all – is honest. He offers a sympathetic smile but says nothing on the matter. If he needs to look good for Hannibal to reveal more to him, then he'll look good. It's not exactly a chore, he's still feeling out the new suit like a second skin and feeling how his body is unfurling to present itself now that it has something to show off.

"It certainly makes one feel more powerful," he says honestly, rolling his shoulders, "I can see how someone can get used to this sort of lifestyle."

And he hopes he won't. He hopes he won't even be here in a month, but back in Virginia in a house and with a good enough record and paycheck to get his dog some friends to keep him company during the day. But for the time being, he settles into the seat more comfortably and crosses one leg over the other in a smooth whisper of fabric.

No matter what the job was, as you became more successful at it, the amount of shit you shovelled seemed to increase exponentially. His boredom was really the worst part of it, but he may have just found a deeply entertaining way to alleviate it. He watches Will settle into the same suit like a second skin now that it has been altered, and he looks forward to seeing him dressed tomorrow in one that was made for no other man but Will Graham.

"I live well, but I avoid waste," Hannibal agrees. It seemed to be true, his apartment wasn't cluttered, it was neatly appointed with what Will would soon come to find only exactly the things that Hannibal used. "I won't pretend not to like fine things."

He supposes there isn't anyone, given the option, who wouldn't enjoy something fine over what would simply do the job. Hannibal leans his elbow on the window and peers out at the snowcovered streets as they go by. "What do you do besides accounting, William? What are your hobbies?"

As Hannibal watches the streets, Will takes his time to watch Hannibal. The man is a walking stereotype externally, but internally seems the juxtaposition of such; he doesn't waste, doesn't have riches to display for no other reason than to show he has them, he is well-spoken, polite, respected, kind… if Will hadn't spent so long studying the man he would almost believe him, the mask is so well-matched it's almost hard to see the outline against the man's skin.

"I have the boring life of an accountant, I'm afraid." He tells him, and it's very nearly the truth. Working for the FBI and getting this assignment so soon after graduating, Will hasn't had time for the hobbies he'd had when he was younger. "I run with my dog, read… I used to fish, before getting access to clean and quiet water became near-impossible in the city." He mirrors Hannibal's posture but keeps his head turned to the man, resting his head back against his curled fingers, the posture revealing his throat and leaving his eyes hooded.

"I daresay you have a far more interesting array of hobbies to choose from than I do. Do you indulge, Hannibal?" he smiles, the question is certainly loaded, "In the time you're not suffering fools and navigating politics?"

Hannibal has found that in the world he inhabits, a little blatant kindness will get you results or get you close enough to slide home the knife. He has simply cultivated it to the level where those he deals with never know when they will get the kindness, and when they will get the knife. From a distance, it might have seemed random and vicious, but up close, in the workings... Hannibal intends to keep Will as close to him as possible. It will make it harder for the man to report anything without implicating himself in any actions that were taken, and he wants William to know how it works. He wants him to understand and experience it.

Hannibal wants to know if he will thrive.

"We are not so very far from the ocean here," Hannibal points out, thinking of Atlantic City, or Cape May. There were ample places to fish, if one could carve a few hours of a day out to do it - he suspects the latter is the case. He also makes note of the fact that William has a dog - it would explain the long red-blonde hairs that clung in the man's collar. "I'm sure your dog would appreciate a trip to the beach."

Hannibal turns his mouth up at the corner. "You'll have to bring him in the summer," he says cryptically. He waits to see if William will put the information together, and then remember that he might not know about the summers out on Nantuxent cove, where the breeze comes in cool over the water and makes living far more tolerable than the sweltering heat. He has one of the great palaces that had sprung up in the twenties and sunk down after the crash, sitting heavy and white on the beach.

The invitation is so natural Will finds himself nodding before he realizes he doesn't plan to be in the company long enough for winter to melt into spring, let alone summer.

"He'd enjoy the water," he agrees, wondering if the mutt he'd rescued from the pound in New York had ever even seen water before, outside of a bath. He doesn't mention himself in the scenario, leaving it up to interpretation. Sometimes lies are the things unsaid. And those are easier to pretend were never lies at all.

The phrasing or Will's previous comment, with him wickedly applying accent to his choice word - indulge - catches Hannibal's attention back briefly - interested.

"I have been known to hunt on occasion," Hannibal says, thinking of the swing of a shotgun in his arm and pheasants falling from the air. "Otherwise my hobbies are simpler than one might assume. Sometimes I sketch. I have a boat, as is expected of me by my compatriots, and at times I have even caught myself enjoying it."

Will lets that settle in his mind as he continues smiling at the man, eyes just short of meeting his. He's realized he makes the effort more, now, to make eye contact, which Hannibal seems to appreciate. He knows about the house on the beach, of course he does. For a time, the FBI debated sending someone in to check if there were records in there, in case he used it as a storage facility masquerading as a summer house. They never got the go ahead for the search.

He can imagine Hannibal as a hunter, he is the perfect predator already, prowling the city as he does with no one the wiser, and the wiser ones silent in his presence. He has immense power over the press and his corporation, it's not difficult to replace the suit with heavy hunting clothes and put a rifle in his hands.

“I’m sure I would make a terrible hunter,” he tells him. “Perhaps why I’ve stuck to fishing.”

He was already slipping into his role, already coming to anticipate and enjoy the experience. Hannibal knows that William will still be with him as the summer crawls around - he is not the sort to give up easily. He will hold his charade up and dig as determinedly as his choice of pets until he could find a seam, or until he found himself in a hole of his own dimensions, and the dirt closing in suddenly over the top. All Hannibal needs to do is convince him it will be the former.

"It's not so very different, is it?" Hannibal asks, with genuine curiosity. His attention comes back fully from the window, and he catches William's eyes in the first solid contact they've had, and he holds them. Somewhere in the red brown depths is a smile, seeming genuine, inviting. Promising. "You find your place to wait, chose your equipment as best suited to your prey, and then sit very still."

Hannibal smiles, and lets his eyes drift away again. "I have never been fishing, however. I would be fascinated to try it - I'm told there's substantial difference in fish you catch versus the sort you get at the market."

“Fishing is patience and reward,” Will replies easily, “Very little violence. You set a lure, and you wait. Keep your place. And let the prey hurt itself. You remain blameless throughout.” He keeps his eyes on Hannibal a moment longer. “And there’s always the concept of dinner tasting better if you earned it,” hey says, turning away himself, allowing his eyes to slide over the expensive seats, the impeccably clean floor, and then up to the window and out into the winter. Everything is better if earned. Anticipation is the best and worst thing that can happen to a person.

Just as a disguise, no matter how well planned and executed, is always a mirror of yourself. Will is walking a fine razor’s edge bringing it up, but without risk he wouldn’t be here. His words have the power to be his demise just as easily as they have to be another step up, closer, deeper to what he needs. He doesn’t let the worry show, the fact that his heart speeds up, that his fingers curl a little harder against his palm at the window. He waits.

The description is careful to suggest itself against Hannibal's vanity. It's very carefully provocative. Hannibal's mouth turns up at the corner at the move. "Wouldn't there be some blame implied by the very act of setting the bait?"

He could confirm Will's statement, and suggest he would be blameless for his intended seduction of the FBI's man, but he doubts that anyone would see it that way at the end. He doubts a defense along the lines William has just laid out would appease.

Then they have arrived back at his residence, and Hannibal lets himself out so that he can hold the door for Will, so that they can begin to fish or hunt, as either of them saw it. Upstairs he'll turn over his books willingly, smilingly welcoming a fox in amongst his chickens. He wonders how long it will take William to realize that he has come to run as a fox amongst wolves instead.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Character development, plot development, the longest chapter in the series so far, and a shitton of UST. I'm sorry.

Chapter Notes

...if it helps the next 2 chapters are PWP (with some plot if you squint)

It had taken Will a few weeks to train Winston out of nosing his way into his tiny closet and rubbing his face over his new suits. And the suits were perfect. Will still marvels at the fact that just by changing the way he dresses he can pass for someone else. Not in the sense of being undercover, but in the sense of completely seeing and feeling his body differently. He'd encountered an old classmate on his way with the drycleaning perhaps a week into his new position, and the man didn't recognize him.

Will had let that fuel him, and threw himself into the work of both the accountant and the agent with new vigour.

He finds that following Hannibal around isn't nearly as taxing as he imagined it would be. Hannibal goes on regular appointments, he socializes, but only takes Will along when he needs him to be seen. In the space of a month – the time that, lamentably, was not long enough to close the investigation – Will has met enough people to bring down half the organization of Philadelphia. Gamblers, drug runners, proprietors of brothels… all masquerading, as Hannibal is, as men without blame. It's fascinating and infuriating all at once, that in the time Will has been not only allowed but welcomed into Hannibal's world, he has found nothing at all to bring it down.

After the first fortnight, Hannibal had started allowing Will free access of his apartment without him being present. And Will took advantage. He scoured the records, ran every single piece of data he could find on the financials through the databases memorized from New York. Nothing matched. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, to connect Hannibal Lecter to the disappearances of thousands of people.

In the entire month, Will does not once report to Jack Crawford.

He buries his anger, covers his frustration with a tired laugh and joins Hannibal for dinner. Day in, day out, until he stops looking at the offered records and starts to seek out new ones.

He’s careful, he plans the time well enough to be able to skim his eyes over a new space and memorize it before returning to it later. And even then, two weeks of this yields nothing but a better knowledge of Hannibal Lecter’s expansive living space. Only the loft remains unexplored, and Will doesn’t risk it, though he starts eyeing it as best as he can from his vantage point in the office as he returns to old records and processes new ones, and when he goes up to retrieve the suits for pressing and return them.

Hannibal has appreciated his meticulousness. If he did not know Will Graham was an agent, he might never have noticed. Hannibal occasionally glanced, though he would not have much cared, back through the records that he suspected were the most tempting, and he found none out of place, not a page out of order.

He had discovered one new wrinkle in an old matter of personal business tucked away alluringly in the back of his personal papers cabinet - where he kept notes of thanks for vaguely worded assistance. Where he stored boring, mundane receipts. The letter barely hinted, and yet perhaps it had been enough to plant the idea.

Carefully, Hannibal has rewarded his every frustration - which he can read sometimes when he glances into the office from the kitchen and sees William pouring studiously over the accounts, but never in public, never when he thinks Hannibal is watching - with ever more luxury. Every time William must come up empty to some avenue of investigation, Hannibal extends his hand a little further.

They eat together nearly every night now, but it is perhaps a week and change past that he had left note of an appointment, and gone out. He isn't certain William had trailed him to his calculated (and necessary, by this point) lowering of defenses. He has discovered that the tailored suits are quite flattering to William, and in addition that the man carries himself differently in them. He has begun to flex and change under Hannibal's guidance, begun to transform into something that Hannibal is desperately proud to possess, and perhaps ever so slightly desperate to own in a different way.

If he had picked a man with dark eyes, and curls of dark hair and long lashes that rested closed prettily on his cheeks with which to relieve his tension, it wasn't entirely in the interests of showmanship, should William have followed him that far.

Will notices the appointment first by accident, two weeks previous. It’s in Hannibal’s personal organizer, not the one Will has control over. He finds it open and earmarked for a certain date, on the counter in the kitchen when he goes to refill his coffee. It has no details, no names, simply the word ‘appointment’, in Hannibal’s slanted, smooth hand. Will allows his weakness to show, and checks back. The ‘appointment’ has been a standing thing for just over a month and more are scheduled for the fortnight following.

Despite the fact that he has actual accounts to check – not his usual fumbling for information that just refuses to be found – despite the fact that this is Hannibal’s personal diary and nothing Will should stick his nose in, he makes a note to himself when the next appointment is and follows. The results are eye-opening and subsequently give Will two new lucrative opportunities. Firstly, the appointments seem to last just over two hours, giving Will plenty of time to explore the parts of Hannibal’s apartment that were previously closed off to him due to the time constraints of not knowing when to expect his employer.

And secondly, the man Hannibal meets for the appointments bears a striking resemblance to Will himself, though more willowy, dark-eyed and self-aware than Will is – considering his profession, not much of a surprise – it's obvious why the appointment is a standing one. Will files the information away but it encroaches on his mind often enough to be distracting. He'd never considered that level of infiltration before, never considered it would be effective. He finds himself both disgusted by the idea and strangely intrigued by it.

Every man had a weakness, and every weakness could be exploited. Will has allowed himself to be pampered, shown around, commanded by the man, would it really be such a step to allow him even more? He glances at the loft with a strange sort of longing; it's the only place Hannibal keeps as his own. Will has never seen anyone go there but his employer, and he spends more time up there than just resting, he is certain. The evening wears on and Will finds his mind too scattered to link information together coherently. He dons his coat, wraps his scarf around his neck and adjusts his hat to the angle he's used to before locking up and leaving the apartment.

Will makes his way to the nearest payphone and calls his information in. Nothing new. One more place to look. Perhaps a lead to follow up. He doesn't mention that Hannibal has a standing appointment with a male escort, it's not pertinent and – strangely – Will is defensive of him, knows the FBI would take the information and twist it into something it may never have been. He doesn't want more suspicion on the man before he can dig something up.

By the time he hangs up, Hannibal's appointment is ten minutes finished, and he curses quietly, aware that the man is used to coming back to his apartment and finding Will in it on a Wednesday evening. He lets out a long breath before taking long, quick strides to the vendor he can see two streets over and purchasing two paper mugs of cocoa. Not the best cover, but one better than nothing. With his drinks, he makes his way back.

Hannibal is late today, in returning. Not strictly a move made on purpose. He had been caught up in discussions with the new commissioner, a loyal man fed from hand and pocket, but an incessant talker. He had not bothered to subject William to it, but he returns with a neatly packed meal for him anyway, should he still be present in his apartment.

Finding the apartment empty, Hannibal supposes William has gone home frustrated for the day. Whatever his real reasons, he was at least an outstanding accountant. Hannibal was impressed with the figures he kept, and was becoming used to the second presence in his space for however many hours it took to do it. Longer, if they were both honest with themselves, than it was usually strictly necessary. Hannibal cooked for two, and William ate like a king. Hannibal sent long bones home with the man as apologies to the dog, for how long he kept his master away.

He tucks the leftovers into the icebox, and unwinds his scarf, shakes the snow from his coat and lays it over the radiator to dry, and moves deeper into his space. He is rolling his sleeves up, running his fingers affectionately over the immaculately kept desk where William works more than he does now, when he hears the key in the lock. There is only one person so free to come and go from Hannibal's apartment. He glances at his watch, and is surprised the man returned. He had already been late.

Will offers Hannibal a smile when he unlocks the door and finds the man already home. He sets the cups on the side table in the corridor before removing his coat and hat.

“They changed the recipe,” he lies, slowly unwinding his scarf from around his neck, eyes on Hannibal, “And I needed to clear my head.” He meets the man’s eyes with a smile, tilting his head just so to raise his chin and leave himself open, before turning away to hang the scarf up and gather his own cocoa from the table. He tries to ignore how hard his heart hammers when he notices Hannibal watching him with more attention than he usually does.

William emerges from the dining room with two cups in his hand, steaming warm, and Hannibal looks up from the desk and his mouth quirks upward at one corner. "The cold does lift the fog," he says, curious as to why the man was back for the evening. "I thought you must have gone home, William - I was late enough to have deserved it. I did bring you food - it should not yet be cold, if you were hungry."

He takes the cup offered to him and has a sip of the cocoa, and watches Will - the guilty posture. He supposes the man had made a call, and he wonders if he will have to cancel his appointment for the next week, or risk federal attention for it. "I hope there is nothing giving you so much trouble you felt you had to stay late."

"I was behind," he tells him, not actually sure why he returned beyond feeling he was obligated to. And even that thought isn't quite accurate. He returned because some strange, depraved part of his mind wanted to know what Hannibal would be like after his 'appointment'. "I shouldn't be too long, I won't keep you." he promises.

"You never trouble me, William. I don't intend to keep you for longer than you like," Hannibal says, and he is changed a little, now that William knows what he is looking for. Hannibal is relaxed and ever so slightly tousled, his tie has been retied hastily, his hair re-settled without as much attention as he gives it in the morning. To the casual eye he would pass for a man at the end of his work day, to Will Graham who knows Hannibal does not usually relax a fraction until he is about to don sleepwear, the signs scream out.

The lure of dinner is, as always, something that Will pauses at. He has grown used to eating well, and Hannibal is a fine cook. He finds that he can get more genuine conversation out of the man when he's cooking something than at any other time; it relaxes him and brings him and Will to the same level, especially if Will is helping. He doubts he'll broach the topic of Hannibal's lateness today, or ever, (at least not in detail, beyond friendly inquiry) but it will be a welcome way to get back into stride after blatantly defying the man to inform on him.

Some days Will can't seem to decide where his loyalties are.

"Dinner would be made better with company," he tells him, taking another slow drink from the steaming flimsy cup. He's been to the vendor before, their cocoa isn't half bad. Though he wonders if Hannibal will call him on the lie about the change in recipe. "Will you join me?"

"Certainly," Hannibal obliges, though he has already eaten. "The new commissioner wanted to send his extremely lengthy regards."

Hannibal had seen the man, but much earlier. It had caused a stream of lateness, and left him irritably late to his vice, and then late home. He knows that he should not indulge to this point, certainly not to the point of habit. It was risky, especially now, but he wondered if perhaps... well, he is certain William knows. If next week he does not get jumped in one of the clandestine hotel rooms where he meets his indulgence, he will know that Will Graham isn't content to catch Hannibal on whatever charge he can manage.

Hannibal can work with that. He returns to the kitchen, and retrieves the bag from the fridge - within the food was neatly packaged, but obviously he had prepared it. He settles down at the island, on one of the tall stools, and ventures a sip of the steaming hot chocolate. It doesn't taste any different.

"What are the state of my finances?" he asks, in a lighter tone. Hannibal is not entirely without the capacity for play. He has seemed more disposed toward it, in fact, since he'd started disappearing on Wednesdays.

Will laughs quietly at Hannibal's long-suffering tone; the man runs a well-oiled and efficient machine, but even in that machine he cannot suffer fools without something to relieve the stress after. There are aspects of Hannibal's job that Will doubts he will ever envy; this is one of them. He gathers the cutlery and settings for the table with practiced efficiency and lets his mind relax into the familiar routine for a moment. It's not as formal as their dinners usually are, but Will assumes Hannibal will appreciate the gesture nonetheless.

"I can assure you, you will go bankrupt well after I've stopped being your assistant." Will tells him, tone just as light, "I have yet to check the paperwork from the docks but I doubt anything will be amiss."

They settle plates, and Hannibal apportions the food so that the greater of it goes to William, explaining briefly that he had eaten - sated himself - earlier. But he has also exerted himself since, and he can stand to eat a little in company.

Will settles opposite the man and carefully undoes his cufflinks, eyes on the food in front of him, before cleanly folding back the sleeves to be out of the way. For some reason, that evening's appointment had weighed heavier on Will's mind than the others had, and he caught himself showing subtle hints of skin, or gesture, that he usually wouldn't, simply to see if he would have any effect on the man, whether or not it was even worth opening the floodgate his dangerously tenuous plan would yield.

"So you were delayed by incessant talk?" he asks, taking up a fork and giving Hannibal a sympathetic smile.

Hannibal has always paid attention to Will. He has always watched with involved eyes, inclined his head. When he listens, he has always been clearly present. It's not something that he displays so consistently with everyone, Will might notice. So if he watches the pale wrists appear from the immaculate shirt, if he notices the extra gesture, it's difficult to tell if William has simply hypersensitized himself to it.

But he has always been watching. Hannibal has not ceased, not now with his eyes sunk close to closed in companionable conspiracy. It makes it difficult to tell exactly where his focus is;

whether it's the sinuous line of William's neck, or his mouth as the man forms words. He is certain that William is displaying, but it's hard to tell the motive. Hannibal will not fall so neatly into the man's trap if he's laying one for a quick conviction.

"Among other things," he agrees, in his vague way. His mind offers up the suggestion of a body stretched wire taut against his hands, and shivering with need. His mouth twitches in a way that isn't quite the threat of a smile - more like an instinctive motion, almost the wetting of lips, almost anticipation. His eyes slide open further and he's there again. Will Graham has his attention. "What's been troubling you? Or did you simply need a change of pace - you can always ask for a day off, William. I don't want you to wear yourself out because you feel you owe me more than your service."

Will starts on his dinner with a smile and takes his time savoring it, the way Hannibal appears to be savoring a memory before asking his question, and Will lets it slide. Lets the man have his evening in peace as he thinks his own through. He won't move now, he probably won't move another few days, a week, if that. Just to see. But the idea is in his mind and he needs the time to work himself up to it. To get ready. In answer he shrugs.

"You've corrupted me, Hannibal," he murmurs, flicking his eyes up a moment and allowing his smile to melt into an amused smirk, "If I take the day off I won't have dinner, or the comfort of an open space to stretch in as I work." it's not fully a lie, setting aside the underlying initial reason he's here, Will does enjoy working for Hannibal. He's demanding but fair, easy to converse with, easy to enjoy the company of. He supposes they could have been friends, in another life, and the thought makes him strangely sad.

"I had suspected you weren't eating terribly well at home," Hannibal allows, with a smile. Perhaps William did not know. Perhaps he never would. Hannibal makes allowances for this in in his mind and finds it settles easy - William is rewarding company. He is responsive and engaged in conversation and allows himself to be groomed and spoiled. "It's just as simple to cook for two, and more rewarding."

And this way he did not need to indulge an endless stream of people in his home to indulge his habit of cooking. Here was someone perceptive enough, that Hannibal had made involved enough to know.

"Perhaps a change of pace," Will suggests, unsure what he's asking for, or if he's even asking for anything. "Change of location." and then... he is. He steels himself, chews his mouthful carefully before swallowing and setting his fork down, "Your expenses have increased in the Chicago sector. Not enough to be worrying but something that could get out of control if not monitored."

It's true, Hannibal's company - companies - had been throwing money at a single investment in Chicago city for a few weeks and the consistency of the funds as well as the ambiguous way they're labeled, suggests a payoff of a buy in. He doesn't voice as such, of course, but it's clear he's implying it.

"I can help you level it back down."

"I'm acquiring an imports and exports depot," Hannibal informs, with some amusement. "In Canada there was never any prohibition, so it's become the best place to get whiskey of any age. But if you think you can help me talk them down, I intend to go inspect my future holdings next week."

The suggestion is an interesting one - it's likely that William is already aware of his intention to go, but he is surprised - pleased, in fact - that the man hasn't immediately decided that the three days would be sufficient to thoroughly toss the rest of Hannibal's space. Of course, he wouldn't find anything but more frustration, but Hannibal is glad to draw that out for him.

"You don't get airsick, do you?"

“I haven’t previously.” Will tells him, amused, as he continues to pick at his dinner. Will has no idea if he can resolve the situation he’d just offered his help in. He’s also aware of the fact that if he uncovers something in Chicago, he’ll need clearance from Crawford before he can make it an FBI case. And he will have absolutely no backup.

He takes in the information about Canada without comment, filing it away to check up on later. If he could link Hannibal to even something small as alcohol smuggling it was a start. But something tugs at Will, telling him to wait, to not lose the biggest ace he has with a quick and potentially failing case. Alcohol was tricky. Alcohol was the blood that fuelled every city now, and the mob controlled it. A smuggling charge would be nothing more than an inconvenience for the man, and death for Will. He’d wait. But he would look into Canada.

Hannibal quirks his eyebrows up. That was incautious of Will, suggesting he had flown in the past - though the airlines had survived the crash of the stock markets relatively intact, it was still a tool of extreme luxury and government conveyance. But Hannibal lets it pass without any remark, aside from allowing a pleased expression.

“Should I start looking for someone to feed Winston while I’m away?” it’s a request for confirmation. Will has learned that such subtleties leave Hannibal in better spirits than outright asking. Perhaps because it doesn’t sound like pleading, or whining, or everything else Hannibal deals with in the business. He glances up for the answer.

"It would be wise," Hannibal smiles, pleased. William had learned him very well, his habits and preferences. His ability to keep things conversational even when they were discussing something that should be strictly business was something that he valued. "We will make it up to Winston, in a few weeks, if you'd like."

Hannibal intends to take 'vacation' for the start of the summer - and perhaps stay and conduct his business if the summer is particularly brutal. He expects Will is going to accept his offer to accompany him, but for now he holds it in reserve. "Our flight is on Tuesday."

"Have you been to Chicago?" He asks, as a genuine curiosity, almost an afterthought. The city is quite different from the one they've settled, but it is not quite New York, either.

It completely slips Will’s mind that he’d been flown from Quantico to New York and from New York to Philadelphia on company request. He’d taken it for granted, as any new graduate would. He concentrates, instead, on Hannibal’s use of the plural, for the idea of

making it up. it sounds more intimate than it should and Will wonders if he should reconsider his new plan or if he should rush it. It's suddenly a more frightening idea now that it has the chance of working and being reciprocated.

"Lamentably, I haven't." Will replies honestly, "I never had the means nor the reason to go before. Accountants aren't known for traveling, we're usually rather sedentary." He levels another amused smile at Hannibal. The man hasn't touched his dinner that Will can see and it's unfortunate, it's delicious. He almost tells him so before biting his tongue, knowing that would be overstepping bounds. Bounds of professional partnership. He isn't naïve enough to call what they have friendship. It's a symbiotic relationship currently skewed in Hannibal's favor; Will has yet to garner any evidence that would prove this entire endeavour worthwhile.

"Did you need me to look into anything specific before we leave?" perhaps he'll get access to some new files, more information, something. The frustrations are weighing on Will heavier than he cares to admit.

"It's not much of a lament," Hannibal assures him. Chicago could already have been Hannibal's, if he cared for the place. But the way business was conducted there left him averse to the area. He shrugs, and considers what he might like William to brush up on. "Keep afoot of what similar properties are going for in other markets. I have the specifications for the acquisition upstairs, but I'll be certain to have it on your desk tomorrow."

He finally lifts his fork and sees to his dinner, though he still eats lightly. It's better, he thinks, the second time around, while it has had a chance to sit and combine. He is pleased by it.

"Otherwise, all I will need are open eyes and ears, William. They will be very careful in my presence, but perhaps you may catch things they wouldn't dare - everyone shapes up when the boss is around, I suppose."

Will is tempted to quip that he doesn't, never has, but it's a lie. They both know it. Will has changed so much from the rookie FBI agent who had stumbled on a plan and had been thrown headfirst into the investigation. Will has become a man of power and respect, a man of intimate knowledge of one of the most powerful empires in America, a man who could – with a single mistake in their finances – bring the entire thing to ruin. But he doesn't.

He keeps himself as meticulously put together as Hannibal keeps himself, as Hannibal expects others to be. The idea that Hannibal trusts Will enough to look at others and judge for himself if they're lying or trying to do exactly as he'd done… it's intoxicating, and very, very dangerous.

"I could get it now, if you tell me where to look." Will offers, a casual thing, a normal request, but he keeps his eyes determinedly down when he asks, only looking up when he's finished to offer a smile, a slightly raised eyebrow in expectation and almost giddy, childish hope that Hannibal will let him.

William's eyes light up so abruptly that Hannibal realizes he perhaps had been waiting somehow to be given permission to go into the space before searching it. That perhaps the

only reason his loft hadn't been violated was out of some respect for Hannibal's personal space that extended beyond doing what was necessary to get what he needed.

"I believe you've worked enough," Hannibal says, but his mouth answers in a smile. "But you may retrieve it from my briefcase - it should be in my closet. I expect you won't stay up too late this evening to review it."

It's a reward for the man's enthusiasm, a careful encouragement of curiosity and new endeavors. And it was consideration for a job well done. In a way, he did trust William, and he trusted that he was intent to pierce into what he could. Hannibal wanted to see how deep he could get, and at the same time, lure him deep.

If Will was any other man, if he hadn't cultivated his cover so meticulously, hadn't honed it to be calm, easy-going and clever, he would have been out of his seat and stumbling upstairs. But that's unseemly. Will continues his dinner, carefully placing a piece of meat between his teeth and chewing slowly, eyes cast down, before he allows a smile to form. A grateful one.

"I'll be sure to be well-rested for tomorrow." He promises him, allowing his eyes up and a corner of his mouth to quirk more.

And he takes his time finishing dinner, savoring it, watching Hannibal eat his own before letting his eyes drift to the city outside the window, as he is wont to do often. By the time he's finished, the cars on the road have diminished to occasional swipes of headlights, not a constant stream of traffic. As usual, he takes his plate to the kitchen – offering to take Hannibal's even though he knows the man will take his own, every time – and sets it down. He doesn't quite have the willpower to calmly wash it and put it away, so he turns, and with a small incline of his head, makes his way to the spiral stairs.

Hannibal takes up his own plate after a moment's hesitation at the window, and he settles to washing them diligently in the water, but his attention is elsewhere. Drifting in a haze of pleased satisfaction. He had William on the hook, he was fairly certain. Now all it took was patience and guidance. He watches his city out the window as he hears William go up around the spiral stair.

The loft echoes the practicality of the whole apartment, with the only addition being light curtains that could be drawn over the windows, which the bed almost uncomfortably abuts along one side - waking too close to the glass barrier might prove a dizzying sight until someone got used to it. The rest of the room is practical - a bathroom and closet line the side that does not hold any windows, blocked off from the room - the floor is wood, but with a thick throw that covers most of the space, the colors muted and masculine in browns, tans, and silvers.

There is, quizzically, a fireplace that must tap into the exhaust flue for the stove. It lays unlit but welcoming. Over it, hangs a reproduction of Leda and the Swan, suggestive and classical by separate arguments. The reproductions of Hokusai set in a trio unobtrusively along the bare wall next to the closet door have less excuse, but they do not draw the eye either. The space as a storage area for secrets is unpromising - there is a single bookshelf with books that seem tame to the casual glance.

Then the closet - a marvel of suits and ties and impeccable organization, and then in the corner, tantalizing, a heavy safe. Closed. Locked. The briefcase sits atop.

Will takes the space in again, unsurprised by how it's as clean and uncluttered as the rest of the house is. It's a place in which Hannibal would be comfortable, himself. He can imagine him retiring upstairs and removing his armour, the tie, the cufflinks, the suit… setting them aside for another battle the next day. This is the place Hannibal doesn't have to pretend to be human, but is one. He wonders how many people have seen this room, and how many had seen Hannibal without the walls and defenses guarding him.

He thinks, for a moment, of his 'appointment', and of how Hannibal would act with him. it's not that it had never crossed Will's mind before, but he does tend to avoid having such thoughts about someone who practically owns him for mundane tasks and occasional company. He can't resist, though, running his fingers over the immaculate bed covering, pressing just enough to leave an impression for when Hannibal returns later and sees it; let him think what he will.

Hannibal commonly entertains - no one would likely question one more body coming and going, should he have chosen to shift his intimate appointments to his own home. No one, perhaps, but William - but he chose not to. He kept his privacy to himself, where he could. There was enough of his life in the public eye that he did not risk the space where he slept soundly and sweet.

Will doesn't spend a long time up here, simply because it's not his space to spend time in. he gives the room a cursory scan to remember it, the dimensions of it, the locations of the doors and book case and safe. He could probably crack it if given the time; patience Will had, it was just recently underlined with very unwelcome frustration that he needed dissipated. Perhaps Chicago is exactly what he needs, to feel out Hannibal more, to clear his head when he's not surrounded by the space that seems to taunt him with the secrets it doesn't keep there.

He finds the paperwork quickly and makes a point of clicking the case shut again, fingers lingering, before stepping away and making his way back downstairs. He doesn't comment on the room or the décor, just flourishes the paper with a smile to show Hannibal he's found it before taking his leave. He thanks him for dinner, promises to see to the abandoned paperwork in the morning – and to not work too hard on the stuff he's borrowed in the meantime – dons his coat and hat and leaves the apartment for his own.

He wonders what Hannibal thinks when he finds the impression of his hand in the bed, fingers gently curled inwards to bunch the fabric as though he'd gripped it for support, or to keep unwelcome thoughts at bay.

He appreciates how quickly William returns, though there must have been a dozen temptations - the book case, the dresser with its various drawers, the closet. Hannibal hadn't counted more than two dozen breaths since the man had gone up, and he returned unerringly with only what he was sent for.

"That's it," Hannibal agrees with a smile, drying his hands on the dish cloth as the dishes sit in the rack behind him. It isn't until later, until his apartment has become solely his own space

again that he ventures upstairs and finds the only thing unsettled is a splayed handprint pressed deeply, deliberately into the plush comforter, and he wonders what the message is supposed to convey, other than to suggest an image of him clawing the blankets in earnest, his form spread and supple over the top. He entertains it, savors it, and then takes a shower that's more frigid cold than hot before he can surrender to sleep.

There is sadly no scent of the man along his sheets. William had touched, but he had not lain.

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It’s not yet summer, and the breeze they walk into when they step out of the plane in Chicago is biting just enough to be noticed. Will wears the pinstripe suit and follows just half a step behind Hannibal so his position isn’t contested. Though, he has noticed, that when they walk together they tend to walk in stride.

Will had spent the days previous scouring the paperwork he’d been allowed access to. Nothing. Nothing at all that he could use against the man that wouldn’t be a shallow and ineffective case. Will refused, despite Jack’s constant pressure whenever he called in, to pull Hannibal in on anything less than trafficking. Anything less and the man would walk, too many people were paid off in the justice system to rely on it to help them. Will needed his case, and nothing he was finding was helping him. the frustrations became harder to ignore and set to the side, and something had to give soon before Will Graham – like any normal human being – hit the limit of his patience.

They’re met by a car very much like the one Hannibal favors in his own city, and a driver with a similarly disinterested expression who needs no directions as he peels the car from the curb. As per his promise, Will had a list of similar properties that fit Hannibal’s preferences in his briefcase. They both know he won’t change his mind, but Will refuses to blow his cover with incompetence. He would call it in when he knew something about the property, perhaps track it through the paper trail to whoever had sold it and work their way back that way. It was a start, if anything.

They don’t talk during the drive, but it’s not an uncomfortable silence, more one they have both grown accustomed to with each other. A tolerance that bordered on friendship.

The flight had been pleasant. Short. Hannibal is glad that it's become the norm, as he dislikes trains and all the time travel otherwise steals away. The driver takes them quickly to the property, the owner of which Hannibal has been carefully bribing all the while he's been buying the company out from under the man.

It was intended to be a very gentle acquisition of power. He needed the space on water - not only for the imported whiskey, but to expand himself into exports. That was all down the line. Hannibal tended not to count his chickens - but he had a receptive buyer in Canada, and he could slide the property across the lake on the boats that would otherwise depart empty bellied and devoid of their cargos. Simple.

"We have three days to romance the property owner," Hannibal says, as they reach their destination. "If you can convince him in one, the Civic is running Cosi fan Tutte - or if opera isn't to your taste, I understand it's baseball season."

The last is delivered with some small humor. He would not begrudge anyone their right to enjoy the sport and follow it, but it did not hold him interested.

Their destination is wholly unremarkable. A dockside set of warehouses in a sea of the same, announcing an importers and exporters. The lake is moving temptingly against the piers. Hannibal lets himself out of the car. "Or there is the obvious."

Fishing.

Will just watches. Takes in the location, how completely normal and inconspicuous it is, the relative seclusion. It's the perfect place for storage and export, but one can't convict a man based on the buildings he owns. At Hannibal's words he turns just enough to show he's listening, chin up but eyes down, lashes fanning over his skin before he glances up properly, a smile creeping to his features.

"Are you trying to bribe me, Mr. Lecter?" teasing and irony thick in his tone. Both know that he is. Both know it has nothing to do with this acquisition or this buyer. Nonetheless Will makes a note of the time they have to get this deal done and focuses on how he could possibly make the transaction memorably simple. He waits a beat before following Hannibal out, hands pushed into the pockets of his suit, hair - that he makes a note needs another trim - ruffled by the wind enough to make him frown.

The place is quiet, just water and wind and the occasional knock of metal on metal as a door off its hinges moves in the wind. Will lets his eyes close for a moment and breathes, thinking he may take up Hannibal on his last offer if they manage the deal. He hasn't had the time to indulge in the relaxing hobby for many months.

"When are we meeting him?" he asks into the silence, eyes still closed, trusting Hannibal to still be there to answer.

In his pockets, Hannibal realizes his fingers have curled possessively against his palms, pushing in as he watches Will take in the area, the offer, and he does not quite smile, but he tips his head as if he is about to, before reassembling his composure for business.

William's integrity had proven stout. Hannibal did not doubt that he had left an impression on it, perhaps even chipped away at it, though he supposes if he did not tread very carefully the dent would spring back and he might lose what he had. William would have to be tested, brought deliberately into association by actions, rather than just the association that Hannibal had encouraged.

"He should already be here," Hannibal allows, and there is an audible disapproval in his voice. He watches Will listening to the sounds of the lake, and appreciates it for a moment before the interruption of business at last arrives on speeding wheels, and from the car roils forth a drunken man belaboring apologies, and Hannibal leaves William to form his own opinion as he is clumsily guided about the property.

It is designed for unceasing work, the man explains to Hannibal - the floods in the ceiling and that drown the surrounding area with light means that even in the dead of night, they can receive and process goods - syrup, whiskey, timber. Within, it is sloppily arranged to a point

where Hannibal is visibly pushed the wrong way by the mixed goods sitting unsorted and difficult to locate, but the structure is sound. The business functions - perhaps with more organization, it could thrive.

Hannibal's offering for what could shortly be a declining business, with the production of alcohol no longer illegal in the US, is generous. The drunken owner has enjoyed Hannibal's hospitality from afar, and perhaps even his current state was attributable to a very fine bottle of champagne sent ahead in good faith.

Will tenses visibly when the man arrives, drunk and loud and too confident in his own space to notice how dangerously quiet Hannibal has gone. Or perhaps it's just Will, used to following him around and reading him like a book, worried at the sudden silence and stillness in a man who, despite his status and composure, never ceases to stop moving. It's a measure of comfort, how subtly Hannibal moves around someone. With Will, he tends to gesture and smile, tilt his head attentively, let his eyes roam. But he is never still. Never as still as this man has made him.

The floor is clean and surprisingly dry considering its location, and quiet inside. Will can only imagine how cold it gets in winter, even at night, and the thought makes him cringe. How many people will be hounded in here and kept, stolen, coerced, punished, before being shipped away to a fate Will doesn't even want to imagine. The only thing he has uncovered in all his research is that not even ten percent of the people smuggled in make it to the sex trade.

"Oh you could get hundreds in here, Mr. Lecter," the man assures him, and Hannibal's gaze goes cold at the bluntness. "Line 'em up or lay 'em down, the space is fine and dry and the wind is usually such that all the sound goes out over the lake."

He still seeks William's opinion on the matter before he makes his final offer - less than he was prepared to, by far, seeing the state of organization that he will have to remedy before this place is functional to suit his needs.

Will's chin raises at the man's words, eyes flicking quickly to Hannibal before returning to the man in front of him. so he knows. He could be a very good in for information if Will pushes properly, gently, perhaps keeps the man so inebriated he doesn't realize the error of his tongue before it's too late and Will has what he needs. He's not an interrogator, but Will is persuasive. The fact that Hannibal is now standing behind him, giving him the floor and the opportunity to make or break a deal is evidence enough.

He doesn't know what to say. Has no idea how to get the man comfortable enough – and quiet enough – to suggest an outside meeting after the transaction. It's obvious Hannibal wants the property, it would do very well to serve his needs of… hundreds. Lined up or laid down. Will's expression is that of one with a bad taste in their mouth. He turns back enough to have Hannibal's attention, ducks his head for his voice to only carry to him, and murmurs,

"The expense would not harm the funds in the long run, with the new negotiation," his tone is smooth but he refuses to meet the man's eyes, angry and disgusted and betrayed all at once, "But there are others available."

"Are they as appropriately suited? I'm wondering if perhaps it might make it worth my while to not have to clean such a mess," Hannibal's tone answers low. It's not quite teasing, not nearly as playful or allowing as it usually gets with William - here he is all business, and he is expecting his accountant to perform to his standards. "Tell me there is one as conveniently located on the water within a ten percent margin of the price I was asked here, and I will be pleased not to suffer this any longer."

Hannibal sighs, and suspects that none of them will be as nicely appointed for his needs. All he needs to do is get this cleaned up. But he has asked William to perform a specific task, so he watches the man go through his paces, with his eyes deferred. He will have to be very smooth to ease this back over, especially with the misleading way the man had spoke. He knows what it sounded like, to ears listening with a specific attunement.

Running his lower teeth over his upper lip, Hannibal appears to consider the space with some speculation. Behind him the man begins to look a little distraught, perhaps concerned that he is about to lose a lucrative and generous offer. Hannibal straightens, and decides he'd like to think it over, as inconvenient as it is.

"Give us the night to sleep on it," he requests, blandly. Even if he wants it now, it will be better to close a deal with someone more sober.

Will closes his eyes slowly and sighs. Time. He has time. If only an evening to do something but he has time to contact the man and meet him before he slips away into the underbelly of the city. He catches the man on reflex before he can open his mouth and contest Hannibal's request, walks with him a short distance, requests his details for record and promises him he'll do his best to convince his employer that this is the place they need.

Will slips the man's details deep into his pocket before offering his other hand to shake and returning to Hannibal.

"I'll negotiate it down." He murmurs, meeting his eyes for just a moment before passing him on his way out, stopping by the door to compose himself, straighten his shoulders and wait. He doubts Hannibal will let him out of his sight for the evening, but he's sure he can get someone to look into the man for him. Use the hotel telephone to lay the trail and hope to hell someone reads it properly. Under pretense of discussing the property, Will could buy himself half an hour, perhaps more, to lay the trail well.

"Perhaps he'll be less deplorable with a telephone line dividing us," he offers in apology for his earlier shortness.

Hannibal is surprised by the way William lunges for the man, for the opportunity to try his hand at bargaining, before he remembers the crude way the man had worded things earlier and thinks he has an inkling of the goal. Very clever, but Hannibal won't make it easy for him either. Let him think he has something to worry Hannibal - another false lead will only frustrate him further.

Hannibal tilts his head as William returns, eyelids lowered in clear amusement at the man's behavior. "I don't want to rob the man, I just want him to have had more efficient

organizational processes," Hannibal suggests, in an undertone, before he bids the man goodbye with the promise to have word back early tomorrow.

In the car he suggests, "Offer him the full amount if he gets his workers to reorganize it to specifications I would approve of. It will be labor intensive and likely interfere with operations for a couple of days, but I can't abide the disarray inside."

A glance at his watch suggests they still have some of the afternoon left. "We didn't close the deal, but as it was my fault and there is still plenty of evening left, I expect you dressed for the opera at seven."

Will lets his eyes slide to Hannibal as they sit and the car silently pulls away from the dock. It's late afternoon but hours still until seven. He needs to make his need for negotiation appear natural, not desperate, despite the urgency he knows is there to get the information out to someone who can being an investigation in the evening, at a time Hannibal will be distracted enough not to allow anything to encroach on his mind, or anyone to intrude on the evening.

"I hope there's an offer of dinner, with the show." He murmurs, bringing the mood back to the comfortable lightness they had before, putting himself at ease just as much – if not more – than Hannibal. He resists the urge to quip about preferring baseball. They sit in relative silence for most of the journey before Will takes a quiet breath and speaks again, eyes on Hannibal hoping to project a reassurance of honesty.

"I know of a few places," Hannibal says cryptically, and he leans back in his seat, as if the day had exhausted him. Travel almost always did. He was a creature of schedules and habits, and socialization with people who were poorly socialized. "I would prefer to cook, but I am not so equipped in this city as I am in our own."

"I'll let the deal rest. Perhaps an hour before I contact him again. Name your terms, name mine, and see which he prefers." Will smiles and cocks his head a little, "Perhaps then we won't need the third day in Chicago."

Perhaps then Will would have something, and the third day would be wrought with spontaneous organization of an arrest. It would be such a refreshing thing with the failures he's faced at every turn.

Hannibal rubs distantly at his chin, a back and forth motion that is absent, but he is listening to Will. "Perhaps not. But our hotel is paid for, and our flight is arranged. Not that I could not rearrange it, it just seems we might find something interesting about the city to hold us that last day."

Hannibal smiles in return, his eyes sliding back to Will instead of the window. "I am impressed, however. Your attitude is enviable, given what you have to work with. Perhaps I should let you broker all of my deals."

Hannibal suspects he would very shortly find himself an utterly legitimate businessman, if not in jail. He can sense Will's frustration, in that glassy eyed determined stare that suggests

he's picturing handcuffs closing around Hannibal's wrists as they speak. Yes, definitely time to rein him in a little tighter, commit him a little harder.

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By seven, Will is standing in the lobby with his hands comfortably in the pockets of his suit pants, a white opera scarf comfortable and heavy against his collarbones as he waits. He opted for a bow tie, dressing as he assumes Hannibal expects him to, and thinks about how long it would take to construct a case if the evidence garnered this evening was useable.

He'd waited an hour, as he himself had suggested, before making two calls from the telephone in the lobby. The first was dialed to a safehouse he knew existed just outside of the city proper. He masqueraded the call as one requesting confirmation of an appointment, providing the details of the man he'd met earlier that day instead of his own, making it clear that the issue should be seen to as quickly as possible before hanging up, seemingly dissatisfied with the service.

The second had been to the man at the docks. Will refused to leave a blatant hole in his plan for Hannibal to find and rip farther. They spoke quickly, Will stating his terms and Hannibal's, and amusingly, though unsurprisingly, finding that the man was more than willing to clear the property for them for the original price. He closed the deal and named the time for their meeting the following day before hanging up and returning to his room.

He feels surprisingly light despite the weight of the decadence he's allowing himself to sink into. He notes, vaguely, that since his subtle, gentle hint, Hannibal has given him more attention. He wonders if his handprint had lingered against the sheets, if Hannibal had left it there until it faded on its own, or if he'd pressed it deeper against the covers before wiping it away. It's a strangely powerful feeling, knowing something so small had elicited such a rise in attention. However, it does bring with it the added pressure of never having time to do his job. To mask his reports with more effort and diligence than before.

Will convinces himself the effort will be rewarded tenfold if he can get some information from Hannibal's contact today.

He doesn't find himself waiting long before Hannibal steps up next to him, similarly dressed and looking less comfortable than Will expects. He doesn't mention it, and instead raises his eyebrow with a smile to ask if they should be on their way.

Hannibal had been unsurprised when one of the porters had called up to him to give him the specific information he had requested. His charge had been in the lobby making phonecalls. Plural. More than was necessary and earlier than he'd suggested for the deal. Ah, a fast mover. Hannibal had hoped to enjoy his evening unencumbered by planning, but he supposes for the future of nights such as this, in Will's company, that he must invest himself now.

He is rewarded for his plans - conducted through the switchboard operator's phone all the way downstairs - with William impeccably turned out for the opera. He is appropriately semi-formal, as they are not attending an opening night, and he looks severe and elegant in his lines. Hannibal supposes any woman would love for him to be her backdrop, given the way

he carried himself in the suit. He makes a note to add a tuxedo to the man's wardrobe, if he proves amenable to opera.

Hannibal appreciates the sight as well as the prospect, and gracefully inclines his head in agreement, gesturing them toward the doors. He had not been so gauche as to arrange their rooms right next to each other, though they were on the same floor. Neither had he intruded - save through the eyes and ears of the staff - on William's private time.

"Have you seen Cosi Fan Tutte before?" Hannibal asks, as he holds the door for William. He does not choose to go by car, instead, though the night is crisp and cool and not yet warming into true spring, he walks. They are only a few blocks from the Civic Opera House, and their dinner reservations are near to it for convenience. "It is not a truly serious work, but given Mozart's lack of a truly serious life..."

Hannibal smiles, warming into the idea. While they sit watching the follies of Gugliemo and Ferrando, two traps will spring. The first will be William's, a heavyhanded attempt to close a fist around the man with which Hannibal intends to do a deal - the sort of thing that would utterly sour business. Second, Hannibal's own men lay in wait to scoop up whatever feds tried to carefully appear into his custody. Then for the rest - Smanie implacabili.

Will finds that opera is something he can develop an appreciation for, if not a taste. It’s certainly an experience, and Hannibal seems to let the music take over him for the entirety of their evening, the most relaxed and content Will has seen him in a while. Perhaps because he was missing his regular appointment, with this trip to Chicago. Will forces himself not to be distracted throughout, not to let his mind wander and meander in circles around what could be happening around the deal and the man involved.

The evening ends pleasantly and they make their way back to the hotel in comfortable conversation and part ways until the morning. Will doesn’t sleep well, doesn’t fall asleep comfortably. Every few moments he’s turning and twisting and adjusting his position, mind going a million miles an hour and heart keeping up. What if this was all it took? What if in the morning they showed up to make the deal and the feds went in for the arrest? What if this could be over?

It’s both a tantalizing thought and a worrying one, and Will refuses to let his mind linger on the latter feeling. He has enough on his mind.

He’s been asleep perhaps an hour when there’s an urgent knocking on his door, loud and crisp, and it makes his blood run cold. A cursory glance at the alarm when he flips on the bedside light tells him it’s just past 2am, and he doesn’t get up until the knocking resumes, louder now, and demanding. He pulls the door open still on the chain and regards his late-night visitor with bleary eyes.

Hannibal stands without, dressed plainly for once. Dark slacks, and a heavy sweater, a coat. Worker's clothes. It likely sets alarm bells going in William's mind, and the hat slung low over his eyes is a soft, peaked cap that says nothing of business like the fedoras he usually wears.

"Get dressed," Hannibal suggests to the bleary-eyed man - he hasn't been sleeping well, from the dark under his eyes. "We have something to tend to."

Timing, in these situations, is everything. When the door closes again with William wordlessly within, sleepy and sluggish mind trying to catch up, Hannibal smiles into the panel with deep amusement. Time to see if he would fly or fall, or try to strike with no ground beneath him, this asp he has hugged to his breast as firmly as Cleopatra.

Will projects his panic into his gestures behind the closed door; hands shaking a little as he dresses, taking the time to make his bed to get the tremors to stop. It's 2am, and in the entire time he has known Hannibal this has never happened. There has never been a wake-up call at an ungodly hour, there has never been Hannibal standing in front of him dressed for war, not cold war, but battle. It's unnerving and the nausea threatens to tip Will into a dangerously vulnerable state.

He drinks a glass of water in the bathroom before joining Hannibal in the corridor.

He remains wordless, and lets the suspense and the man's own curiosity rip at him as the other re-emerges, dressed down as well. Hannibal approves - sleepy and exhausted as he was, he had taken his cue from Hannibal. He leads the way down to the car, through the dark lobby of the hotel and out into the black night air, over the black pavement below.

The car that is waiting is the same as the one they had used the previous day to get to the docks, and Will's heart hammers that little bit more in dreadful anticipation. Had his call been tapped? On a random line, even with the code he'd been using? Had something happened to the deal that Will had no control over, and now it had gone to hell? He's prepared, of course, he still has the properties set aside if this one did not pan out, but he doubts that at that moment Hannibal is thinking about acquisition.

There is a strange aura around him, like the trembling coil of adrenaline around a predator just vibrating with the need to move. It is one of the first times Will is scared the man can see him, really see him, and it takes a lot for his composure not to waver.

"What's happened?" he ventures once the car has been moving for perhaps ten minutes, maybe fifteen. The silence between them is as cold and empty as the night once they had passed out of the city on their way to the water.

"Someone has come asking around our business, upsetting our proposed partner," Hannibal says at first, smoothly. Then he allows his language to become more plain. Beneath the coat, where he sits and it has folded open at his side, he is armed. It's another first for Will, to see the man wearing a revolver, the Rast-Gasser's butt looming distinctive and with enough character to suggest it had accompanied him through the war.

"We have federal interest in our dealings, William," he continues. "And while what they've found is likely utterly uninteresting, I want to know how well they are informed. It will be easier to anticipate how they move if I know what they know."

He smiles grimly, as the car rattles over old roads - they are not going to the same docks, the same warehouse. This is further from Chicago, out deeper along the shores of the lake. He

can feel the tension radiating off of William, almost hear his heartbeat speeding. "We have a rare opportunity - this man was extending beyond his reach, I think. He was looking to find something before he acted. Let's learn where his information came from."

Me, Will thinks. It came from me and it was good. It was clear. He had covered his bases, kept the conversation short, provided just the details and nothing more. No one knew him here, no one had come with them to Chicago. He's still reeling from the fact that news had travelled to Hannibal so quickly, that the move had been made and intercepted before the night was even through. He notes the gun and swallows, looking away to try and convince his reflection in the window to calm down.

"Perhaps letting the man leave in such an inebriated state was unwise," he murmurs, "He seemed very free with his words with no thought of their consequences."

He's trying to smooth the situation over, twist it, calm Hannibal with the suggestion that it was a horrifically bad coincidence and nothing else. There were arrests in big cities constantly, people pulled aside, sometimes because the very look of them displeased someone. Surely the feds can't be faulted for doing a job. Surely Will can't be faulted for trying to do his. The nausea level has increased and Will closes his eyes and breathes through his nose as the car continues on, through the still night far out of the city and past the docks themselves. That, alone, is worrying.

"It's good that I had him watched," Hannibal agrees, watching Will's mind race from the corners of his eyes. He watches Will try to convince himself that Hannibal does not know. He offers a little more information to help put him slightly more at ease. "I've found it wise to watch all of my potential business partners. One can never know what a desperate man - or agency in this case - will grab for."

"I doubt interrogation will be successful," Will ventures, voice carefully controlled, "I think it's a requirement for them to be trained to handle that. A gentler approach may yield more fruit." It's a subtle offer to talk to the man himself, to get him as prepared as he can to lie, to wiggle his way out of this in a way Will has successfully managed to to date.

It's a guilt, compressing his entire being, that he needs to get rid of.

Hannibal turns his attention back suddenly when the other offers to take over the questioning of his own accord. He had expected to have to put forth the offer, but here William stepped neatly into the position of his own accord. Perhaps he was truly dedicated.

"I have yet to fail in an earnest discussion," Hannibal suggests, with a cool tone that's unusual. "But if you think you can obtain better results with a soft touch, you are free to try."

Just as heavily settling on William's shoulders is the implication that should he fail with his method, Hannibal will turn to his own for success. He reaches across the space to steady William, with a gentle touch to his arm.

"He was going the wrong direction, William. We have nothing to worry about - whether he was just fishing for information or someone tipped him off, all he discovered was my intent to legally import aged whiskey," Hannibal's mouth turns up at one corner. Stand them up or

lay them down - casks and barrels. "But it affords an opportunity to know where to better cover my tracks."

Will feels an almost painful relief flood him at the thought that Hannibal assumes his nerves are related to the family being found out and prosecuted, not that he himself was the informant that had gotten a man into hot water. He tries to smile and it falls short of realistic and genuine. He nods just once and turns away again, feeling Hannibal's fingers press just a touch before his hand slides away again.

When the car finally stops, they are outside an empty boat house. The door is partially ajar and a weak light can be seen illuminating the gravel leading up to it. Will's heart jumps to his throat and he forces himself still, forces his breathing to smooth to something manageable. He can see his breath when they set out of the car, and concentrates on that. The gravel crunches under their feet and although the walk isn't a long one, Will is chilled to the bone.

Inside, there is one chair, and one man. The bag hangs over his head as it's ducked, in unconsciousness or exhaustion it's hard to tell, and alters the familiar human form to something obscure and disturbing. Will almost wants to laugh at how stereotypical the situation is. But the man in the chair may not be in it long, and the rest of the stereotype is not quite as amusing a notion.

Will hears Hannibal exchange a few brisk quiet words with the man watching over their hostage and keeps his hands in his pockets as he turns to regard the room and steady himself. He is not an interrogator, he is not a negotiator. He has slipped by on layers and layers of lies because he can control them and become them. He convinces himself he doesn't know the man, won't ever know him, and that the lie he needs to portray is one that won't incriminate him.

Silently, he tugs the bag off the man's head, watches as he jerks at the movement and the sudden onslaught of light to his eyes. When he looks up, Will lets out a long breath of relief. He doesn't know him. Has never met him. But in the moment it takes the man's eyes to adjust he meets his eyes and gives his head a very small shake, as though a tick, and purses his lips. The change in the man before his is palpable and Will swallows.

"I've never known feds to incite an investigation based on syntax." He murmurs, brows furrowed and tone lower. The lie is surprisingly easy to slip into when he knows he has the man's attention, has his tenuous trust to talk his way free.

Hannibal settles in at the back of the boathouse, to watch William slip into yet another new skin. He wants to see how well the man wears it, and he hopes to be satisfied by how well he owns it - the man may not know it, but his survival depends on his performance. Should he fail to please, should he fail to bury himself deeply enough to get results, Hannibal will cut him free. William has performed well enough to this point that he will even be removed unscathed for the better part.

The detained fed swallows air rapidly when the bag slides free, and looks up at the man he's expecting to be his interrogator, and then blinks a few times. His accent, when he speaks, is pure Chicago. A local boy.

"I don't know what you mean," He says, wetting his lips desperately. "I was asking a few questions, that's all. I heard the property was up for sale."

The fed has blue eyes and dark hair, and a sort of sleepless expression that mirrors Will's own at times. He is a man who thought to find an opportunity, a good one. He was trying to make a change, reshape the world a little. He is, unfortunately, not as good a liar as William. "I wanted to make sure all the taxes were in order, that's all. I guess I found out they ain't."

Will's brows rise in surprise.

"I wasn't aware the bureau sent agents to investigate the state of taxes" he murmurs, voice bland, expression blank, "You're very fresh or very stupid. I may not be wearing a gun but I am all that stands between you and a gun to your head. You've made a lot of people angry, getting into business that wasn't yours."

He doesn't know what Hannibal wants to hear, and he is desperately scared that if he doesn't get the answer he needs, this will not end well for the young man in front of him. he's no older than Will in appearance, why had they sent a graduate into the field so soon? He thinks over his own assignment and swallows thickly. If this interrogation doesn't go well for their captive, it will go much worse for Will.

The young man regards him carefully, mouth slack in worry and the cold underlying terror of the situation he is in.

"Look," he sighs, "We got a tip that he was an unlicensed distributer. They pop up on occasion when they're not careful and get out of hand if we don't cut the thing off at the knees. I went in to talk to the guy, just to talk to him. that's all."

Hannibal watches William carry himself, watches him lean into the role with a bland voice and using the light against his glasses to keep his eyes unreadable. He could be terrifying, if Hannibal wanted him in this role. He has plenty of muscle. But this will bring him in, harden him into the cause through implication - it won't allow him to get out empty handed.

"I don't think that's the entirety of the truth," Hannibal voices, without stepping into the light. He is the scarier figure of the two, standing shadowed. He's providing the counterpoint to William's civility - currently by implication only. "From where did your tip originate?"

The agent turns his head toward the voice uncertain where his attention should be going. He glances back at Will, uncertain who he should be addressing. Then the man sits back, challenging, quiet. He's getting a look like he expects he has nothing to lose. "Up the damn food chain, pal. Good job, you caught me, I'm a uniform grunt with a badge in my wallet - you think they tell me anything other than where to go and what questions to ask?"

Will tenses but doesn't turn. He has no idea what to say to diffuse the situation, to have Hannibal leave without suspicion and to have the boy leave without any missing fingers. It's one or the other and his head throbs with the thought.

"With tips like these it doesn't go through a food chain." Will murmurs, he knows from experience but masks it as research. "With activity as suspicious and as potentially socially

threatening, they send experienced agents, so you're no grunt unless you're masquerading as one." He purses his lips, glad that Hannibal can't see his face, that no one can but the man in front of him. he mouths 'lie' before turning just enough to give the man a clearer view of the shadow Hannibal is hidden in. He can't see his face, but he can address him with respect if Hannibal chooses to speak again.

"There are sixteen properties in the area with the same dimensions, ranging in price and location. All are on the market now, all are dens of the wrong kind of the law, but you were sent here. To that dock, to that man." He swallows and sighs, looking at the ground a moment. "I would encourage you to think your answer through and make it honest. Because if my partner steps out to talk to you as I am, you are a dead man."

It's no small threat. If the agent sees Hannibal here he will not leave the boathouse, and there will be nothing Will can do about it. They can't let him loose when Hannibal is attached to the investigation, to the location. He hopes to hell the boy knows how to lie.

Dark eyebrows draw in over blue eyes in a look of clear confusion, and the agent's mouth twists as he tries, around his uncertainty and fear, to put what he's supposed to do together. The clear blue eyes flick again toward the shadowed figure, and then up to Will, and the idea of hope slowly forms behind them.

Perhaps he is younger even than Will, it's hard to tell with terror keeping his eyes wide and the light in here. He makes eye contact and tries to figure out what best to do. Finally he settles back in the chair, plants his feet and tips the front two legs off the ground before letting them thump back to the earth, a nervous gesture.

"We heard there'd be a big shipment of cocaine," the agent says, lifts the chair, lets it thud again, looks nervously in Hannibal's direction before returning his gaze to Will. "That it'd be sitting out there on the dock, bold as brass."

He exhales, he suspects he's not getting out of this whole, but he looks up at Will and tries to trust him - he's never seen the man before, but he has no option but to trust him. "I got here and it was maple syrup. Maybe someone was hoping I'd catch something if I was here. Maybe someone wanted my attention away from what they were doing somewhere else."

The chair lifts, thuds. "But if I wasn't curious before, I sure am now, huh?"

Will wants to curse, wants to drag his fingers through his hair and yell in frustration. It was going well, it was going so damn well until the last few words. But he had touched on a very fine point that Will would use until Hannibal heard him, until it got through to him and they let the poor kid go, perhaps bagged and dropped off at some obscure part of town, but let him live.

"Quell that." He advises, giving the man a firm look to stay quiet for the moment before turning to walk back to Hannibal, fingers pressing against the bridge of his nose, pushing his glasses down a little.

"He doesn't know," he murmurs, using his middle finger to readjust the spectacles against his eyes as he looks up, "If this just happened to be the dock he was sent to feds should be

investigating the call, not us. He doesn’t matter.”

He keeps his voice calm, almost bored, as though this is as much an inconvenience to him as it is to Hannibal, as though he couldn’t care less what happened next as long as they could return to the hotel and sleep and forget this happened. He makes a note to set out the more appropriate of the properties for Hannibal to peruse later today, he doubts the man would want this property now, with the attention it had gotten, accidental as Will hopes Hannibal believes.

"He was asking after my involvement," Hannibal corrects, with his tone low, and his eyes on the third man, the guard still standing watch over their prisoner. "Something sent him here after me. He's lying to us."

Hannibal's eyes flick to the man again. "I'd like to know what his suspicions are - better to know what the agency knows in its entirety. You needn't be gentle with him."

There is a test in his words, a sort of implication that this period was a limbo. That the man was unlikely to live the night, it was just the next few hours that he had left. Hannibal, however, doesn't state it implicitly. Here is the point where he can put the hardest pressure on Will, can temper him and see if he'll stick or shatter.

"And why the call tonight, why the property I was considering out of the sixteen you say are available," Hannibal continues, and he lifts a hand to William's shoulder. "This is a danger to us, perhaps it means we have a rat in the house, though why they would send someone to investigate an alcohol shipping endeavor... is curious to me."

Will’s mouth goes dry and he tries, he tries so hard, not to look like he’s drowning on his own breath. He has no idea what to do. He has never had to deliberately hurt anyone – the police commissioner aside, but that was a brawl, adrenaline driven and angry – he has never attempted to negotiate, he’s exhausted and a little cold at an ungodly time of the morning in a city he doesn’t know, and he is scared.

“Because words get misinterpreted and lead to suspicion.” Will replies quietly, tone resigned, heart hammering in his throat. He can bluff well enough but when well-rested. He can lie well enough but only with notice. This is something completely out of his depth and it makes him sick to the pit of his stomach.

"That drunken idiot," Hannibal agrees, watching William. He can see how strongly this is affecting the man, but then he comes through it. He makes the decision to keep his cover - or at least to try doing so. Or perhaps to shoot Hannibal with his own gun, though he doubts the man would need to.

Will swallows lightly and holds out his hand. “I need to borrow your gun.”

It’s not a question, nor is it a request. Will feels himself cracking under the pressure of all this, and he’s had months preparing for this, learning the man in front of him, his preferences and approaches, his demand for respect and order and his complete lack of empathy when someone didn’t fit the bill. So surely, someone who has no knowledge of who he is, someone

who was probably out on a routine check and arrest assignment, wouldn't hold up well to pressure either.

It was strange that he no longer wore a gun, not when first they'd met he'd worn one so openly and obviously. Perhaps he'd decided the cut of his suit was spoiled by the holster, or perhaps he had been so lulled by Hannibal so as not to consider that he might need one.

Hannibal does not point out the lack, but instead he produces the revolver, fully loaded, and places it grip-first in William's hand, with his fingers still curled around the cylinder. "It's double action, don't squeeze the trigger until you're ready to shoot," Hannibal advises - William carried an automatic, he'd noticed. "Don't eject the spent casings. Don't try to fan the hammer."

Eight rounds worth of very specific shell casings laying on the ground was a little more than even the usual incompetent law enforcement could ignore - which was why Hannibal chose the revolver, where the casings did not fly off to parts unknown. If eight shots was not enough, something was severely wrong.

But with the simple instructions delivered, Hannibal surrenders hold of the gun just like that to William, curious to see what he will do with it.

The gun is heavier than Will's old companion had been – he'd left the gun at home for fear of Hannibal noticing it, asking why he had one on his person when he was nothing more than a junior accountant – but he can navigate it well enough. He nods at Hannibal's instructions but says nothing more, taking the gun and returning to the nervous agent in the chair.

Silently and deliberately he sets the barrel just above the man's left knee and keeps his eyes on the point of contact as he takes a breath to speak.

"You have one chance, and you better take it." he murmurs, "Because I am tired and I certainly did not need you interrupting much needed rest, wicked as I may be. Your curiosity in this matter has the potential to save you a limp. Perhaps keep a few years of life too before your luck reverses and curiosity decides to take a debt due. Now." He lets his eyes flick up. "You will tell me about the call. You will tell me about your reason for showing up at the dock. And you really don't want to test me."

The frustration, at least, is genuine. Will is angry. At himself, for missing the mark so badly he now held a man's life in his hands, a man who he essentially had called out in the first place. Angry at the fed for not lying well enough to be convincing. At the idiotic man who had talked himself – and by proxy Will – into trouble earlier. At Hannibal. There are no words for how angry Will is at Hannibal. He draws the hammer back and curls his fingers tighter around the handle.

The man looks up at Will and shakes his head, at a loss. Everything he's done has zig-zagged back on itself. His eyes were confused, his brows drawn in. He'd been told to lie - and he'd lied. He'd been told to investigate the situation, and he'd come out here to do it. Blue eyes blink up at Will again, and then finally comprehension dawns, and his eyes flick toward the shadows where Hannibal stands.

The man swallows, and looks up with eyes that beg for leniency as he gets his words together. "The call came in this afternoon," he states clearly, and he looks up and holds steady eye contact, in the inferior position but trying to express how earnest he is. "Someone on the inside called us to tip us off. A climber, a Mafia boy trying to hone in on some other territory. I only know the Chicago boys, I'm sorry, this guy was from out of town. Like Lecter is."

He swallows, and his eyes drop to the gun for the first time, where he swallows again. The muscles under the barrel are shaking. "His name was... he was one of the sicilians. Corleone." He's putting information together on the fly, trying to remember subservient mob families that might gain something by Hannibal's removal. "He sent me here, said it was practically a done deal. That there was definitely something to find but all I got was the runaround."

He swallows again, drags his eyes up from the gun. "I'll stop asking questions," he says, but it hasn't touched his eyes, the fear. His mind is ticking on it. "I'll get out of here and go back and I won't file a report. I'll say I got a bad tip, that's all. Jesus, don't shoot out my knees... we got a lousy pension plan."

Damn straight you do, Will thinks angrily, the pressure of everything mounting until he presses the barrel harder against the man's leg and then just as swiftly takes it away. He sets the hammer back, and meets the man's eyes for a moment, just enough to part his lips to mouth an apology, and just enough to see that the man knows. That the man can see who he is, knows how he's involved. He knows. He knows, and even now he still has a voice, still has the chance to tell Hannibal everything, had it, even, and under pressure didn't lose his composure and reveal Will to him.

They'd never met before tonight and already Will feels like less than half the man this man is. The guilt bubbles higher, hotter, and he steps back, expression slack and anguished. Then he swallows, clears it, and turns.

"The questions will stop," he agrees, "And you will not file a report." He passes the gun back to Hannibal, meeting his eyes briefly as well, noting the strange mix of amusement and something he can't quite name, and then looks away. "And you won't say anything." With that he leaves the room, walking far enough to be out of earshot before doubling over and being violently sick.

Blue eyes track Will's hasty departure, gone wild and uncertain again. Hannibal watches the agent watch William leave, and doesn't step from the shadows. Will hadn't injured his fellow, but he had threatened him. Had perhaps been on the verge of injuring his compatriot, but Hannibal hadn't missed the way they'd spent long seconds looking, understanding each other nonverbally. That had been an interesting dance, and he decides that the feds have certainly upped their proficiency for finding young, recklessly self-endangering talent.

Behind William, there is the sharp report of a gun, with no proceeding protest.

After that is the low sound of agony from Will's compatriot, and Hannibal has the man removed. He won't die - Hannibal is an able enough surgeon to know where to shoot, and it's unlikely with modern medicine, that he will lose the hand. He may never fire a gun again, unless he was a southpaw, but the maiming will leave enough blood in the sawdust.

He respects talent enough to not kill the man, but neither will he loose him again. Instead, he crouches down and pries the bullet out of the floorboards. The agent disappears out the back, bleeding, and with a bag over his head. He is in for the boat ride of his life, likely terrified, pained and bleeding. But he'll survive it.

It had been so unexpected, so uncalled for, so wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong and his damned fault and for a moment Will lets his walls crack, lets a quiet sob escape him before wiping his mouth with the back of his wrist and running the fingers of his other hand through his hair. For all his morals, Will Graham was nothing more than a failure and a coward. Nothing.

It takes him several moments to compose himself, get his breathing back to normal and straighten up from the ground. His mouth tastes vile but he can wait until they're back at the hotel to brush his teeth and drink.

Hannibal draws up next to William while he is recomposing himself after vomiting off the pier. He sorts the bullet into his palm, and then throws it in a long arc off into the lake. Hannibal waits, watching William from the corner of his vision, looking out over the water as in the other direction, a boat speeds away.

Will takes another moment before straightening his shoulders and hazarding a glance at Hannibal. The man looks, if not at ease, then at least calm. He's not sure if he's ashamed to look at him properly or scared to.

"Accounting doesn't see this much action," he offers apologetically. "I can have the paperwork for the morning for the other properties in the area. Perhaps to be safe, the one he found should be abandoned."

It's a weak attempt at recovery but Will won't let himself slip more until he's behind a closed door, far enough from Hannibal for the man to not hear him. He's exhausted, numb, and unsure if the determination to destroy this man has grown in him or diminished. He thinks back to his other, more obscure, plan at further infiltration and closes his eyes. it seemed the closer he got to the man the more pain he was in for.

"I didn't expect you to take my gun," Hannibal agrees, and he crouches down to rinse bone and blood off of his fingers in the lake water below. "I think it's best we consider other properties, yes. A shame about this one, but someone is interested."

Hannibal draws a deep breath and lets it out. "I forget that you were too young for the war, at times." He shakes the water from his fingers and then slides his hands into his pockets. He has buttoned his coat over the gun again. He can hear the boat sliding over the water, starting up the motor. He doesn't give William any more information than he has to - and he won't, unless the man asks.

"You did well," he says. "Above and beyond the call of duty, as they say. Let's go back, a drink will settle your nerves some."

Turning, Hannibal lifts a hand and pats it gently on William's shoulder with a genuine affection, before curling his hand under the man's upper arm to guide him to come along. The

contact is brief, reassuring, and professional. The car still waits, slung low and black. It hasn't moved, nor has the driver - ominous or relieving.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The sexual tension had to burst at some point right?

Chapter Notes

Lots of making out, hand jobs, blow jobs, potential accidental voyeurism...

A huge thank you to all of you who are still with us through all that previous UST. We love you.

There are six appointments scheduled in Hannibal's personal ledger.

After Chicago, Will had thrown himself into his work with almost vindictive vigor. He didn't sleep well the rest of the time in that city, either kept up by nightmares or the impending terror of Hannibal figuring out who he was and killing him in his sleep. Outwardly, he was pleasant, busy, brokering another deal – better price and a very good location, though not quite as well-hidden as the place they'd lost – and enjoying Hannibal's company. Inside, he was screaming.

It was a relief to get home and have Winston whine and wriggle in his arms in welcome, licking his face in a way that made Will think he knew and wanted to help him clean the fear away. The dog had always been too damned intuitive.

And now there are more appointments in the book and Will is caught between relief and something far more complicated. He hasn't called in anything since the incident on the docks. He has no idea what the man's name was, but he's certain the bureau know about his disappearance and can link it back to him. He's ashamed and angry, and it's a dangerous mix when applied to a work drive.

In Hannibal's absence, Will has tried the safe – so far unsuccessfully – and gone through the book case carefully, making sure to have the books appear near-untouched when he was through. The frustration of finding nothing on top of nothing is making Will fracture. He was doing well, he had gotten so far in, had so much access and had found nothing. He can almost imagine Jack Crawford screaming at him that he is incompetent and a disgrace to the job.

It doesn't seem to help motivate him.

He doesn’t realize he’s done it until he steps away, mind too caught up with keeping himself from screaming outright. On the immaculately made bed are two points gathered and gripped tight enough to wrinkle, Will’s hands now at his sides flexing a little in sympathy. His jaw works, and he is too far gone into this, too much invested, to just give up, to just pretend there is nothing to find and walk away.

He doesn’t adjust the bed. He returns to the office downstairs and buries himself in paperwork.

Hannibal stays late, and later. Perhaps he is making up for lost time, perhaps he is as frustrated by Chicago as William was, though he has walked away with a more or less excellent deal. The location isn't as well suited, but no new eyes had come to look at it, or if they had they had been careful enough. He knew what had happened to the agent they sent, and that the man was alive.

He had noticed that William had very carefully not asked - whether that was because he assumed the man to be dead, or because he thought the man was but wanted to hold onto his hope that perhaps he wasn't, Hannibal isn't quite sure. Still, when he comes through the door, he is well exhausted, tired - he doesn't expect Will to be there. The man had been making excuses to leave just after dinner, or disappearing before Hannibal arrived with hastily scribbled notes that he was tracking something or another down.

Hannibal moves quickly enough through the darkened office that he misses William at first - partially out of expectation that it was nearing ten in the evening, and surely the man would have gone home by now. It was common for him to leave the desk lamp on in the apartment, so Hannibal would not return to an entirely dark house and he could glance over and review the work left on the desk.

Will watches Hannibal pass him by as though he isn’t there and just waits. He has perhaps three minutes of quiet movement to endure before everything goes still. So he’s seen the evidence of Will’s presence in the loft, has most likely come to his own conclusions about it.

Hannibal settles the briefcase in his closet, atop the safe where it belongs, and he has stepped out of his shoes to cubby them away where they go, loosened his retied tie and noted it is wrinkled enough to require steaming, and he deposits it in the bag for the dry cleaner.

He is undoing his cufflinks when something catches his eye as off about the room. Hannibal's bed isn't quite a disarray, but there are two clear handholds, gripping and lifting the blanket in frustration to clue Hannibal in to the fact that the man had been up here uninvited. He supposes it was only a matter of time before the idea formed that Hannibal would be out every Wednesday evening.

Found nothing again, Hannibal supposes, but he has to challenge this. Even as he reaches out to smoothe the offending points off the top of the bed, before he moves back downstairs and debates if he should call the man even at this hour to discuss the trespass. Will flips the pen between his fingers before starting on another report, appearing busy for when Hannibal inevitably comes downstairs again.

"You didn't take the cleaning," he suggests mildly into the silence when William looks up at him from his furious scribbling. "Was there something else you required in my bedroom?"

At the question, Will sets the pen down deliberately and offers a tired smile.

“The reports you requested. You had me prioritise them before you left for your appointment. Some of the work was of a delicate nature so I assumed you would want them kept private.” He cocks his head a little and his eyes narrow as surely as his smile widens by a degree, “They’re on the safe.”

He gives it a beat before drawing his chair back and standing.

Hannibal had not seen the folders laying on top of the safe, but his mind had been adrift as well. He supposes they could well be there - and knowing Will's prior attention for detail, they were. The cleaning marks William's mind as wandering elsewhere, and Hannibal would have bet back to the man William had doomed with his tip off. He knows that Will is unlikely to call back in now without something to give them.

“I’ll be sure to take the cleaning in the morning, it slipped my mind.” and it was the first time. Will has never, before this, forgotten a job or made a mess of one, and he’s counting on Hannibal to remember. Surely he won’t be struck out for forgetting to press his ties. He makes to move around the table but stops, eyes down, fingers pressed lightly to the very edge of the table.

"And-?" Hannibal begins to ask about the bed, as that's something he can't reconcile with the rest of the picture. Perhaps the shelves, a disrupted safe, perhaps his dresser drawers out of order but the crimped handfuls of sheets. William cuts him off with a question that is explanation enough.

“Are your Wednesday appointments a necessary expense?” he asks casually.

This was curious. Hannibal had supposed if this move was coming it would have happened long since - and should it have occurred within the first few weeks of their meeting, he would have shed it off like another skin. He intended to seduce William - but not in this way. He wanted the man to be his, to belong to the family and turn around to welcome Hannibal's grip. He wanted a successor, if he was truly honest with himself, and he had seen the potential in a federal agent, after he'd done toying with the man. William had found no holes in Hannibal's armor, a relief and a disappointment both.

Except for this hole, perhaps. Hannibal is curious where this is going. He stands still and straight with his collar and cuffs undone, his hands tucked into his pockets, but he moves back out of Will's space to let him have command of the desk. Hannibal doesn't answer until he's at the windows, looking down and out on his city.

"Do you object to the expense," he prompts carefully, not admitting anything until he knows exactly what William does about it. "Or the nature of my appointments?"

“I don’t know the nature of the appointments,” Will replies easily. It would not do well to reveal he’d followed Hannibal to one, though he suspects the man knows. “But the expense is

such that you could perhaps acquire another property with the money.” He stands a little behind Hannibal but doesn’t enter his personal space, just as Hannibal had respected his.

“It would be better for business, in the long run, I suspect.” And then he leaves it, lets his words roll over in Hannibal’s mind, let him wonder if the offer is there or simply an ambiguous and teasing implication. Either way, Will doesn’t plan to do anything more with the evening. It’s late, his head is busy with figures and frustrations and Hannibal looks like he enjoyed the appointment. The attempt would fall flat and Will could not face another disappointment.

“I apologise for intruding on your space,” he offers, ducking his head in a slightly submissive gesture, “I’ll leave such forms on the stairs if you request them prioritised another time.” There is a silence, but it’s not ringing, not uncomfortable so much as anticipatory. For something. They’re both on the edge of something that could end or make them both and neither is stupid enough to make a move before its correct time.

Hannibal's mouth turns up only faintly in a smile and he turns to look over his shoulder at Will, because he should be pretending not to know what the man truly expected to get out of it. There is no possible correlation to expenses that were perceived as needlessly exorbitant with no understanding of what exactly they were and handholds carved deep in his coverlet without the third point in the middle that William knows exactly what his appointments are.

"I have so many properties," Hannibal laments, hands in his pockets, and tone still light. They are both aware of the underlying tension, and both grimacing into it as if it would be taken like a smile. "Perhaps allow me a few bad investments."

Hannibal does not request one thing or another of his prioritized files, whether they're left on the stairs or the safe it doesn't matter, William has free run of his house and he has chosen to leave this message for him.

“Perhaps I’ll go. stop imposing on you so late. Unless, of course, you wanted something else from me this evening?” Will says slowly.

"William," a murmur, as the other is packing his things. "A man deliberately leaving his mark in another's space could be misconstrued."

There is a pause, then, "Do it again and I will consider it a declaration of intent. It's inadvisable to allow me to misunderstand your intents. Have a good evening."

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As promised, Will takes the cleaning early in the morning, at the unholy hour of just-past-seven, before returning to the apartment to work. It’s quiet, with Hannibal gone again to a meeting he’d assured Will a fortnight ago he did not need to accompany him to, and Will allows himself to relax. He works through the morning before leaving the apartment for lunch, mind unburdened and eyes clear.

He’d slept well the night before, something about having made the decision so finally that makes it easy to rest and prepare. The desperation clawing at his mind had settled to a cool

and smooth determination. He ran personal errands while he was out, getting his hair trimmed, picking up supplies for Winston – and returning home just briefly to leave them with the neighbour – before swinging by to pick up the cleaning and return to work.

It’s late afternoon by the time Will is finished, everything set carefully where it belongs on the table. He knows Hannibal will stay to keep face, after the meeting, despite hating the mindless chatter and the greedy idiots it amused. He knows he will return tired, drained, perhaps offer dinner if Will’s imposition of the evening before hadn’t angered him or festered in silence overnight. The meeting ended at three, he doubts Hannibal is far. So Will makes his way upstairs, walking carefully and slow, each step sure and quiet until he’s standing at the windows, his back to the bed and the stairs he’d climbed.

And he waits. A clear, silent, declaration of intent.

Hannibal's evening has been a long one. He allows himself in the door, but his free hand is rubbing fingers at his eyes and the tension forming behind them, the pressure threatening to set his head pounding. If he's expected William to move one way or the other on the ultimatum delivered the previous evening, he hadn't expected it so soon. He does not know if William is truly dedicated enough, or if he will let the matter drop in time when Hannibal does not make a pass and fall into what could be a very clumsy but effective trap.

Hannibal has let it slip his mind. His initial senses tell him - from the hat and coat remaining on the stand - that William is still here, but he is not settled into the kitchen with a book and a cup of coffee waiting for Hannibal to come home to see if anything else was needed of him. The desk is organized as if the man were finished for the evening, and nothing else is out of place.

He finds William standing in clear outline against the sunlight through the windows, the curtains drawn back to reveal the late afternoon sky. The days are growing longer, warmer, and down below the caged in trees are beginning to send out green buds into the city air.

Hannibal goes still, stops, to take in the sight - it's meant for him, he can appreciate it. Not that he'd ever felt guilt at doing so before. He moves to his closet, and continues his routine - settles his briefcase atop the safe, shoes where they belong. His jacket and tie go into the cleaning bag, and there had been no dry cleaning to carry up today given the miss they'd had yesterday. He removes his cufflinks with his eyes still on William, and they disappear into one of the top drawers of the dresser.

Will smiles, not shifting from his place by the window as Hannibal deliberately goes about his routine in silence. The anticipation is making his fingers twitch and he curls them into gentle fists in his pockets to stay still. He is presenting the offer, not pushing it or retreating away. He is prepared to wait for Hannibal to make up his mind, or dismiss him with politeness the man affords everyone he meets. He hums when Hannibal steps close.

"You must think I am making a truly bad investment," Hannibal says, his tone light but low. He moves across the space at last, moving up behind William to look down over the city as well. He does not yet touch. "Or perhaps you think I've already invested in such, and find it redundant?"

“I wouldn’t be a good accountant if I didn’t advise against unnecessary spending and offer a better alternative.” Will murmurs. It’s surprisingly easy, this game, and Will allows that perhaps not all of it is pretend, not all of it a front for his cover. He’d gotten used to the man’s presence, his company, and despite Hannibal’s work, he enjoys being around him. slipping that little bit farther doesn’t present itself as a chore.

He turns his head just a little, enough to see Hannibal out of the corner of his eye, and ducks his head on a quiet breath, not moving to touch yet either. In fact, beyond that shift, not moving more at all.

“Was the meeting worth the company?” he asks.

Hannibal answers the last point first, his eyes sliding toward Will and noting the tense line of his shoulders, but the easy tone of his voice. He does not know how much of this is a ploy just to gain further access to Hannibal - more specifically his secrets. He does not know how the man's tastes run, because he has not seen William romance anyone. Hannibal suspects this isn't an order from above, it's an innovation to the ideas he's already tried to insinuate himself deeper.

"The results will be worth the meeting," Hannibal says, allowing some tiredness to creep into his tone. "And my duty is done for a little while. They like you when you make money for them - they like you better when you can be seen and touched and swayed, and then they can claim they gave you the ideas that made money for them."

Hannibal would rather not talk about how tiresome the company was, however. He is good enough at playing the game to endure it, and smart enough to know how necessary public relations were to a continuing flow of money in so that he could continue to direct the flow outward. It's not the matter at hand.

He backtracks to an earlier statement. "There are some expenses that it is not a requirement of your position to prevent me from incurring," he says keeping his tone smooth. He is interested, certainly, obviously - but also perfectly content to continue paying his stand in to keep things smooth between them.

Will’s smile quirks a little higher and he turns then.

“Perhaps just advise against incurring.” He amends before tilting his head up. “It is also not required of you to listen to me. But I believe the expenses are unnecessary, or perhaps will be in future.”

The way Hannibal approaches him, in every aspect of their work and life, even this, he gives Will a choice. He almost encourages him to disagree, to argue and present a better answer just to prove he isn’t following Hannibal blindly for favors or money. In the months he’s been with him, Will has never once been swayed by riches. He’s appreciated favors but never asked for them. And now, when the offer is clearly appreciated, clearly desired, there is still the option to step back, apologise, and forget this happened.

Will’s smile gentles to something natural and soft.

It's only then that Hannibal moves, when the invitation is clear but unspoken - it's still a dangerous line to be the first one to cross, but he has lured William so far along that he can afford to take a step back in his direction. There is a very fine line between a lure and a collusion. Once they are past it, it's just as illegal for William, just as dangerous to be caught at it in the public eye or the legal one.

Hannibal turns more fully toward him and reaches up to brush the backs of his fingers over Will's cheek, and wonders if he has ever done anything like this. Perhaps they had sent him down this rabbithole knowing his inclinations, or perhaps it had been a lucky happenstance on his part, or perhaps he was an opportunist. and had no intent to follow this through - no idea what he was getting into.

Hannibal had warned him.

He accepts the invitation that has been left written twice for him, even if Will hadn't been sure the first two times what he was expressing, if he hadn't been committed to it. Now he was here to deliver it in person, so Hannibal curls his hand around the back of William's neck and pulls him close, taking the risk that the first move will land him with handcuffs in the next few seconds. He is determined to at least make the kiss worth it, as he pulls their mouths together hard. If William wasn't committed, this will offend, will assault his narrow mind and violate a matter of privacy that should not have been assaulted in Hannibal. Otherwise, it is heat and reward, and the consummation of so much patience.

Will inhales quickly and closes his eyes but doesn’t pull away. It’s surprising in the pressure and abruptness, but not in the sensation. Will doesn’t feel revolted or cold or in need to pull away and forget this. He makes a quiet sound before parting his lips just enough to be invitation. He’s never had his sexuality questioned, by others or himself, and it has never been something that is at the forefront of his mind to define him and matter.

He can appreciate that that approach has been useful, for work, for undercover, but at the moment it just feels good. It feels nice to be cradled against someone and feel them just subtly shift their body to fit his. The fact that Hannibal is that person, that he is adjusting himself to make this comfortable, to make this easy, is both surprising and oddly warming.

Will doesn’t shift away. He rests his hands against Hannibal’s arm and bends, just enough to adjust himself in turn, enough to press close and reassure. This is happening because I want it to.

Hannibal's other hand emerges from his pocket and settles on the other side of William's neck, thumbs extended up along the man's cheeks so he can feel if his muscles tense and relax, feel the pulse faintly. He feels him open under his mouth at two points of contact, and he pushes his tongue forward to take and taste what he is given, and tries to remind himself that this will have to be slow. That this should be slow, to keep it going the direction he wants it to.

The kiss goes on long, until they need to break for air, and Hannibal swallows and exhales. Their bodies have drawn closer of their own accord, touching in a long, firm line from their collars to their thighs, and Hannibal finds he is aware of every inch of the man, and surprised by how it affects him. Certainly more than what he had with his standing appointment, which

was practicality and a business exchange. He hadn't expected anything more here, and he reminds himself, just once that he needs to take care.

Neither of them are what they pretend to be here, neither of them are there for a reason that will allow this to be any less practical, any less a business transaction. Hannibal's eyes are mostly closed, but he can see Will's wet, panting mouth - how his eyelashes rest on his cheeks and he does not yet stop tilting his head, and Hannibal kisses him again, his hands dropping low to settle at William's waist over the vest he still wears, and he pulls him closer, slides and shifts them together in a motion of bodies that leaves little to doubt.

And it's intoxicating, and Will goes willing and eager and draws his hand higher too, to Hannibal's shoulder and over it, to his neck and around, in the same movement opening his body and making Hannibal's do the same. He's dizzy and adrenaline is shooting through his system at a constant unstoppable rate with the idea that this worked. That his need to get under Hannibal's skin just a little more worked. But it's not the drive behind it, that, Will doesn't want to approach. Not now.

When they break for air this time, Will shifts, arching his neck down, his shoulders back, bringing one hand up to rest on Hannibal's chest as though to keep him from kissing him again, but soft enough to imply that he only needs the space to breathe. It feels better than it should. It feels warmer than it should, and Hannibal smells good, with the slight hint of cologne and the underlying tone that's just him. Will realizes the entire loft holds the same smell and curls his fingers inwards as he had on the bedcover the first time, gentle and implying.

Will can feel himself smiling and looks up, fringe no longer flopping into his eyes after the careful trim.

"I don't know how this usually proceeds." He admits quietly, the smile directed inwards a moment, at his own inexperience.

Hannibal gives him the space, but he turns his cheek against William's and pulls in his scent, which tries to be clean but holds dog and cheap city apartment just underneath the sweet soap smell and too many cold water bathings. Curling his fingers tighter against his side, Hannibal draws back to make eye contact, though it's heavily lidded.

"Dangerously," Hannibal warns, as if he didn't know. "But not so differently than you might know otherwise."

He exhales, slowly, gathers himself for better words and pulls his thoughts back from the scattered points of contact they're fixed on - the feel of William's suit vest and shirt beneath his fingers, the way his belly is flat but not firm against Hannibal's own, the way his thighs and hips seat against his own, very nearly point for point.

Hannibal runs his tongue over his teeth, against the roof of his mouth, and asks. "Have you been with women? It's not so different."

Will knows this is dangerous, perhaps more dangerous for him than for Hannibal, he never did find evidence of former lovers, partners or any romantic attachments; if Hannibal gets

bored, if he decides Will isn't what he wants, or this isn't how he wants him, he can get rid of him, Will does not have that luxury.

At the question, his smile folds into an amused smirk. He has been with women, he had enjoyed it at the time. Short relationships, slightly longer ones… they happened, Will moved on.

"Perhaps for you." He replies, because he is fairly sure it will be a major difference for him. but he doesn't voice his concerns, doesn't show them, deep down he feels them enough to be there but they don't weigh on him, and again he wonders just how much of this is an act to get his job done, and how much is it the complicated twist of his gut whenever he saw the word 'appointment' in the ledger.

He slides both hands to rest against Hannibal's collarbone before starting to pull the buttons carefully through their holes.

Hannibal is careful, at least, with his genuine attachments. He has not had many.

"Mmm," Hannibal does not elaborate. William has the idea of it, the basics in mind - he is too intelligent not to. Not everything was about penetration, not everything quite so cut and dried as the social ideal. The ideals of the time - of the area - were so very missionary. He cannot blame William for having so basic an idea of sex, he is young and proclaims to be innocent. Hannibal indulges the question of whether that was an act or not, if it wasn't a calculated expression designed to make him more appealing to Hannibal as a partner.

He turns William slightly and pushes his back against the window, curving slightly away to let Will undo his buttons while he pushes his mouth along the cord of muscle leading down the man's neck - but he does not mark, he simply wets, applies his tongue, trails down, and brings his hands in to work the buttons of Will's vest from the bottom up, to keep his hands out of the way.

"If you find yourself uncomfortable," he murmurs, and then he has to pause, with his mouth against the shell of William's ear, to push his tongue against what he knows is sensitive skin in a slow, tracing motion. "Say so, William. I won't be offended."

Will arches into the unexpected touch with a quiet, pleased noise and nods, grateful for the out in case he needs it, amused that Hannibal still offers it, like he does with every other deal in their association. And this is a deal. On some level, this is giving one thing for another, surrender for information, pleasure for silence, it was a transaction and a deal, only neither knew how high the stakes would go.

He rolls his body forwards, encouraging the touches, finding himself almost craving them now that they've started. He shivers at Hannibal's tongue and closes his eyes again on a soft needy sound. It's close, and more intimate than he thought it would – or should – be, and Will is sure that he will lose himself to this.

His vest loosens as his fingers finish with Hannibal's shirt and he reaches forward again, just enough to curl palms over Hannibal's side, relishing in how warm the skin is, how foreign and soft it is under his hand. Hannibal is still holding him pinned with his clever mouth and

silent presses of promises and Will just drops his head back, much as he can, and explores blind.

There is such response in Will's body, such earnestness in his actions and the way he arches and how his breath and pulse hitches, Hannibal does not doubt that he wants this, on some level. That even if it were decidedly calculated, he was not repulsed by it - he was not forcing himself into some unnatural contortion. For some reason, that soothes Hannibal a little. Likely, even were William not so inclined he would have pushed here until the other said stop, admitted his mistake, but here when he knows better, when he feels how the body under his hands arches and reciprocates his touches... it will be less a chore to try and break the man and more a welcome release of tension.

It will bind them together a little further, Hannibal thinks. If he is cunning and careful, it will pull them tight and wrap Will further to his side.

He undoes the buttons of William's shirt next, and when he swallows, it clicks in his throat in a way that's revealing. That suggests how long he's wanted this - perhaps since the first moment he'd gotten the man into a suit, the image had come of it spread wide under Hannibal’s hands, flayed back like layers of skin and open to Hannibal's mouth, which he applies, though he has to curl himself to reach Will's collar bone, and he can affix his mouth there with his teeth in the faintest evidence, while his hands rove down, slide between the glass and Will's ass, and grip to pull him up ever so slightly into his mouth. With his teeth pressing indents into Will's shoulder he can look out over his city and see the sun crawling toward the horizon.

If he wasn't hard before, he is now, in clear evidence against Will's thigh, where he refuses to part their bodies more than he has to. He has never allowed this in his own room, always insisting on the residence of the other. Hannibal begins to think that may have been a mistake.

Will’s breath hitches on a quiet whine and he moves to accommodate, one hand moving up to curl over Hannibal’s shoulder for support, the other snaking around to his chest to just press there, splayed and hot against him, feeling his heart beat faster and –

Almost involuntarily, Will’s nails dig into skin, both surprised and aroused by the fact that Hannibal is hot and hard against him and all Will has done, essentially, is kiss him back. It’s empowering and Will feels a smile tug at his lips again. He turns his head enough to press his lips behind Hannibal’s ear, smile widening enough to draw them back and press teeth there instead, for just a moment, and then Will is back to knocking his head gently against the glass with a breathless moan.

They’re close and both almost vibrating with the need to make this go faster, and with the patience it’s taking not to. And Will realizes, belatedly, or perhaps because his mind is a little preoccupied, that he is pressed against the window, where, should anyone choose to look, could see them. Floors and floors above the city but near buildings of the same size, and the thought is both disturbing and almost seeking to challenge, to see if Will will request to move away or take what he can get where he can get it.

One part of his plan that he hadn't thought through to the end would be that should this particular line of investigation garner results, he will have no way of delivering them with hard proof. Not without smearing his reputation through the dirt, and in that way potentially hindering if not halting the investigation later. So he doesn't think on it now. Now, he lets himself relax, lets himself be shifted, and adjusted, pulls Hannibal closer, arches back for him… and it is for him. until Will is certain this deal will be a two-way arrangement, this is for him.

Hannibal's breath pushes hard against Will's skin as Will shows him his teeth and claws, but keeps them gentled. Shows him that he is still possessed of a self, that he is there and paying attention - as if Hannibal would give him a choice. He sinks slowly down - William is new to him, he doesn't know where to touch to provoke response, and that's an exciting prospect, a worrying one.

His mouth finds William's chest in a line down his sternum, and then he turns to flick his tongue at Will's nipples, pushing the open flaps of shirt and vest aside to give himself access, and he pays attention to first one, then the other until his knees begin to protest and burn at the bend, and Hannibal straightens them just once, quickly, and presses his mouth against William's open once more, for just a moment, pushing his tongue within against the rush of speeding breath and rising temperature, before he sinks all the way to his knees.

It's new, it's very new, far more passion-fuelled – or lust-fuelled – than anything Will has experienced before with women and his cheeks color at the thought that if Hannibal is able to get such responses from him then perhaps Will needs to rearrange his approach to relationships and their dynamic. He hisses through grit teeth at the lips against his nipple, slightly rough and just teasing, testing, a sensation that sends tremors through his muscles, that makes his hands slide around to hold the back of Hannibal's head, splayed in his hair, messing up the perfectly combed presentation.

And then he's being kissed and reciprocating more desperately than before, needing to feel more against him, wanting to explore his own responses as much as he wanted Hannibal to see them, and they have all been honest. His fingers slide further, just behind Hannibal's ear, one hand cupping the back of his head as the other strokes the top almost with affection, a strange sort of reassurance despite Will's mind flying apart in all directions and his heart hammering.

This is a mistake, with the windows open, with perhaps William's handlers - if he has bothered to retain them so far - watching from convenient vantage points in the nearby buildings. But it incriminates William as surely as it does Hannibal, and so he pushes his second thoughts aside, and with his mouth affixed just over the waistline of William's slacks, his hands work the intricate catch - the metal hook and eye, and then the button hidden beneath the layers, to hold the line flat and attractive, while his palm splays flat over his groin and then his thumb pushes at the zipper, insinuating between layers of fabric.

Not so different, as he had said.

Will jerks just a little at the press of Hannibal's palm against him, but not in a way that suggests he wants this to stop, simply in surprise and a hint of nerves. The image alone, of Hannibal on his knees in front of Will, allowing him to touch as surely as he's taking leisure

to, is unbelievable. Someone so powerful should be where Will is, pressing his shoulders down in a suggestive gesture of dominance, and yet… Will curses quietly and licks his lips to moisten them, fairly sure his eyes are wide and darker with pupils blown. And at the look Hannibal gives him he realizes he's already lost. Lost the ability to distance himself from it, to simply use his body as a distraction while he gathers what he needs… because he's enjoying this. He's loving every moment.

So many nerves springing to life under Hannibal's touch, and the way Will's hands seem to be certain they want to touch him, but not sure of where or how. It begins to confirm that Will had not lied to him about his inexperience, though it leaves Hannibal somewhat concerned that they will reach a point where William asks to stop and he will not want to. He supposes that should that be the case he could forge an emergency appointment - it was worrisome that he had come this much into the influence of his own desires. He had not previously needed so consistent an outlet.

Hannibal watches him, eyes tilted up as he works the zipper the rest of the way free with deliberate slowness - not because he's waiting for Will to cry stop, but because he wants to take his time and see the reactions write themselves on Will's features. They are there and plain - he wants it. He is surprised by how badly, how much he enjoys it already, and Hannibal has barely touched him, skin to skin.

He sits back, just a little, with his breath hissing out of him in exhale as he eases the join of slacks apart, tugs them down just a little over Will's hips to widen the opening, and then insinuates his hand over the thin fabric beneath to feel Will's cock fill and harden for him beneath, just the barest curl of his fingers so far, the slow press to guide the length up against Will's belly and trap it between skin and fabric under his ministrations. Hannibal's mouth is watering, he's hard enough to be uncomfortable in his own pants, but he does nothing to ease that yet.

First he needs to get his accountant invested, he thinks, not that the man wasn't already in past a point where he likely thought he would be. The warmth of his hand shifts to the side, and without moving the man's underwear out of the way, he wets along Will's length with his mouth, slicking the fabric to skin with saliva, making sure to soak through enough that Will can feel it, and deciding not to move further - not to make the contact more direct until William asks him to.

Will whimpers. It's loud and he instantly regrets it, this show of such obvious enjoyment and vulnerability. But it's undeniable with the way Hannibal deliberately teases him, presses his tongue against him in such a way as for Will to feel it curled around him, rubbing wet fabric against his already sensitive cock. He brings up one hand to press against his mouth to keep himself quiet and rolls his hips forward in a silent plea for more.

His inexperience lies in this position, not in bringing someone pleasure or allowing them to see his. Will has never had self-esteem issues, he is a man comfortable in his skin and in the way he is. He was never nervous or incompetent with previous partners, but with previous partners he had been the one bringing them to this state of wordless pleasure, not them him. and it's almost embarrassing how quickly Hannibal is bringing Will down to his base responses of quiet moans and breathless pleas.

He presses his forefinger between his teeth and bites down, the hand still in Hannibal’s hair curling and flexing to grasp against him, urging him, and noticing that the man refuses to do more, almost like he’s waiting, baiting Will to ask, instead. It takes a lot of willpower to pull his hand from his mouth and form a word, but he manages, the quiet plea surprisingly stable as he drops his head back against the glass and bites his lip on another embarrassing sound.

Hannibal draws back slowly, running his tongue against the roof of his mouth to wet it again as he lifts his hands, to pull down the waistband and get Will free at last, to see the most intimate parts of him at last - though he won't be satisfied with just this much. Not until William is laid out on the bed where he'd written his invitations in grips on the blanket, placing his hands where he had placed them before and leaving rumples that mean something more than a promise.

Reaching up with one hand, Hannibal pulls William's fingers away from his mouth, while the other curls around his damp cock, strokes once to be sure it's fully hard, and then sinks his mouth down onto it in a slow, deliberate gesture. He holds William's other hand away from quelling the sounds that come out, and each one curls down his spine in a hot line as he takes him deeper in his mouth, drawing it out slow and getting him good and wet before he draws back to lave his tongue over the head, then just under, and feeling his body twist in response, in instinct that renders him almost helpless to his own pleasure.

When he's sure Will has the idea not to bite his sounds down against his fingers again, Hannibal reaches up to get the man's pants the rest of the way down over his hips, inelegant and rough tugs to get them down around his ankles, before one hand curls behind William's knee and pushes circles against the skin there, distracting while his mouth works.

It figures Hannibal would enjoy hearing Will undone, it’s the only weakness he has so far asked of him; to hear him moan at the heat of Hannibal’s mouth, hear the choked-off whines of pleasure as Will does everything in his power to stay still and standing, when he’d rather be on the bed twisting out of Hannibal’s hold to have the man hold him tighter to keep him still. The image sends a shiver through him and Will drags nails lightly over Hannibal’s scalp.

He’s seeing stars by the time he feels the fabric of the pants slide away, tugged by impatient and experienced hands, and he doesn’t want it to end so fast, not that quickly with him pressed back against a window losing his mind to Hannibal’s mouth. He wants to last longer, to give Hannibal back as much pleasure as he has given him. he doesn’t want to be useless, just an outlet. He tugs at Hannibal’s hair more urgently until the man pulls away, the expression his eyes makes Will’s throat constrict, and his jaw works a moment before his mind realizes that he has to form words to get what he wants.

“Bed,” he suggests breathlessly, expression apologetic but only for the short delay coming. He doesn’t want Hannibal to stop. He’d probably sink to his knees and beg him to continue if he did.

“I just… I’m not sure I can stand… I want…” he presses his lips together to shut up but hopes his pathetic attempt was enough to get a message across. He wants more. He will give Hannibal anything he asks to take from him. he tries to not think too far about how his desires are overriding the very reason he started this.

The corner of Hannibal's mouth turns up, and he sits back on his heels rather than his knees, reaching down to pin William's pants between his ankles to make it easier for him to step out of them, as he expresses what he wants.

"Alright," Hannibal agrees, getting up to his feet once William is free of his pants. It's alright, what William wants - it's alright for him to want it. Hannibal will give it to him, and all he has to do - all he ever has to do - is ask.

Getting to the bed is not hard - it abuts the window on one long side, and Hannibal lets William get himself to it while he stands to draw the curtains over most of the windows. He lets the other get comfortable, and shrugs out of his own shirt, and folds it together, laying it aside over the empty top of the dresser before he settles onto the bed beside Will, to take all of him in now that William has laid himself bare on the heavy coverlet.

Will undresses quickly, with far less regard for the treatment of his clothes than Hannibal applies to his own. He settles on the bed and waits, unsure if he should lie back, sit up, sit on the edge. The idea that he has to present himself as something on show has long ago left him, Hannibal seems content with the awkward fumbling Will offers in reciprocation to the sure hold and touches he receives, and Will has no reason to pretend he is something he’s not.

Well.

Not in this current situation.

He chooses instead to rest back on his elbows, body lax and comfortable despite the nervousness that’s growing under his skin. He is fully naked now and Hannibal is not. He has no way to hide his insecurities and personally perceived shortcomings as he watches the other man strip his own shirt – Will swallows – and join him on the bed.

Flushed, eyes dark with the pupils wide and obviously hard, obviously ready, Hannibal can appreciate how much he has been given, and how much better this is than the proxy he had satisfied himself with. Hannibal reaches out and curls a hand around William's hip, pulls him just so, so his back was in alignment, lets him cool a little while his hand wanders the expanse of him, the other settled in his own lap with the back of his thumb pushed against himself for the barest contact as he searches out scars and marks, and the faint freckles on the man's stomach.

Will moves as he is moved, surrendering his hold to lie flat and comfortable against the bed, arching minutely into Hannibal’s skimming touches, eyes first on the movement of his hand, then up to regard Hannibal’s face instead. It’s fascinating watching him so interested, so invested in the simple act of just touching Will, just seeing how his fingers can elicit a quiet intake of breath or a twist of his body or an arch for a harder touch. Will is impressed with himself, having never explored the concept of having so many reactions to something so little and seemingly insignificant as fingers against skin.

After a while he shifts, just a little, to bring a hand up to slide up Hannibal’s chest to his throat, splaying his fingers there before tracing the outline of his jaw to his ear, pausing before skimming the skin of his cheek – the slight stubble leaves his fingers tingling – and stopping with two fingers on his lips. His eyes narrow in thought and Will gently tugs

Hannibal’s lower lip down just enough to push his finger in, past it, and against his teeth. They part, whether in surprise or genuine interest, and Will doesn’t linger, teasing the fingertip inside before pulling it away, tracing the bottom lip with the saliva it had gathered before letting his hand drop away.

When he smiles, there’s a promise there, and he moves the hand to cover Hannibal’s in his lap.

His mouth parts to allow the retreat of the intruding fingertip, his tongue curls flat and rough beneath the pad, and he tastes ink, paper - skin beneath it all and he can smell the nervous arousal Will emits - sharp and heavy on his tongue and with a rare sort of musk or spice. He hadn't, Hannibal knows then, been lying. Familiar arousal smelled different, this had an edge to it.

He leans over the bed, his body at an angle to William's and curls his hand back around the man's cock as he shifts his own hand, turns it to admit William's fingers, and then covers over them, and at the first pressure that is not his own his mouth closes over Will's length to drown the hum that forms itself pleasurably in his own voice against the head of William's cock, and he finally lets his eyes close and commits to this.

It's unlikely the other will say no now, will ask to stop, so long as he proceeds slowly - and he wants to. He wants this long and pleasurable, and he wants to pick William's seams apart until the man begged him to be reformed - and then Hannibal knows, for a little while, for a few moments, he'll have the man whole, without that backdrop of his mind whirring away to try and find the notches in Hannibal's armor.

Enough moments like this and he'll have the man. He'd wager on it - he already had, he thought, as he pushed his tongue along the slit in the head of William's cock, the tip of it pointed before he folds it back and repeats the motion with the flat surface of his tongue.

The onslaught of sensation is a little overwhelming and it takes a moment for Will to find a comfortable grip and stroke Hannibal in a way he knew he himself enjoyed; he has nothing else to go on for the moment, but to learn what Hannibal liked just as surely as Hannibal was learning him. And he did, very much, like this.

He draws one knee up and lets it fall, a more open position, as he twists his body around to bend at the side so he could insinuate his hand against Hannibal harder, for a moment matching the man’s motions against him stroke for stroke until he got enough coherency back to improvise on his own. It’s a far more difficult task to unbutton a pair of pants, unhook them and slide the zipper down one handed than Will thinks most people realize, but he manages, keeping a constant pulsing rhythm against Hannibal the entire time to keep it pleasurable.

He skips the barrier of fabric Hannibal had so teasingly played with on Will, and slides his hand directly against skin, gasping as Hannibal does something with his mouth and it throws his entire plan into a turbulent afterthought. He presses his fingers gently against the silky skin just at the base of his cock and rubs there, slow circles then splaying his fingers to extend the sensation into different patterns. He feels Hannibal roll his hips into the feeling,

and grasps him fully, stroking with a slowly building rhythm as he feels his own balls draw up and he gets dangerously close to losing himself.

He struggles, just a little, before turning his hand and thumbing the slit over and over, spreading the precome around the head and lower, trying to keep himself distracted. His other hand splays in Hannibal's hair again in both warning and encouragement, and he doesn't stop himself when he moans the man's name, the sound low and needy and warm.

Knowing that what he was asking was a lot, Hannibal doesn't expect endurance from William - he has had enough experience to know what sounds meant to relentlessly keep doing what he had just done, he knows the point of no return, and yet as he's driving for it, William gets his own ideas and Hannibal has to break back to pull in a gasp on instinct as his body responds, as the first pressure against the sensitive head of his cock is almost too much, the dry rough pad of William's thumb on the verge of oversensitive, the slide of loose foreskin in his grip and the pressure.

His pants feel constricting of a sudden, where Will has to pull them tight against his back to have enough room to touch him so low on his cock and slide up, and Hannibal doesn't recall being this hard this quickly in a while.

But then William is gripping his hair and it's Hannibal's name in his voice, and he won't let himself be distracted from or deny this, so he sinks his mouth deep, though it dangerously splits his concentration away from holding himself back. He presses his tongue hard under the head of William's cock and takes him over, appreciative of the warning, as Will's release paints bitter stripes on his tongue that he does not swallow.

Will comes hard and lays boneless, chest heaving for air as he tries to catch his breath, aware that his actions have caused a similar loss of control – though perhaps not quite as loud and obvious – but only vaguely. He bites his lip on a low, long moan before letting it slip from between his teeth, a curse riding shotgun.

He proves distracting enough that the rough stimulation against the sensitive head of Hannibal's own cock drags him over after, and he draws back to breathe, to press his tongue against the palm of his own hand and then his teeth biting into the web of his thumb as he swallows down half the salty, bitter taste and pushes the rest of it against the salty skin of his own palm and tries not to peel his lips so far back from his teeth to reveal the grimace in its entirety. He has never enjoyed the taste, though he likes very much what he can accomplish with the application of his mouth, and in this case the slip is due to the very pleasurable attentions to himself.

Over that fast. Hannibal swallows again, and sags out of the tautness of muscle that orgasm creates, before he settles flat on the bed in whatever kittycorner angle they've wound up in and pulls Will against him, quiet, to catch his breath.

He feels Hannibal shift away and drops his hand over the side of the bed to find something, anything, to clean them up a little. He finds his shirt, hesitates, and then uses just the sleeve to clean his palm before he feels Hannibal tug him back and goes. It's oddly easy to roll onto the side, half on Hannibal and half on the bed, and rest there. The warmth is comforting and

they both smell of sex, sweat, and a hint of ozone, though that can be attributed to the weather.

Will slips one hand into Hannibal's pants again but it's to help him slide the restricting fabric away and down – he shifts enough to do most of the work before crawling back into the loose half-embrace when Hannibal is similarly naked – than to encourage more interest. For the moment they are both sated and tired, and content to stay as they are.

Hannibal feels the sweat cooling on his skin, and feels Will shifting to get the pants off of Hannibal. He arches just enough to make it possible, reaches down to pull his socks after, and then settles his arms around Will and lets his mind slip into the processes of recovery. The slowing of breath, the drifting of thoughts and awareness of warmth against him.

Will lets one hand draw light patterns over Hannibal's chest and down to his stomach, eyes closed and breathing finally slowed to manageable. He hums, just once, a single low note, and licks a thick stripe up from Hannibal's collarbone to the side of his jaw.

He tilts his head back and lets William access his throat, as easy as that, baring himself and vulnerable in a moment. He is utterly disarmed, because he has allowed himself to be. His own voice answers from his chest - no words, just a low rumble of sound as Hannibal recovers himself, but makes no rush to do so. His eyes slide open, just barely, looking down before he curls his free hand through William's curls, cups the back of his skull gently, and tries to decide how much of this is real.

"Not so different?" Hannibal confirms again, and his tone is hazy and pleased, a purring sound that doesn't make much effort to escape his chest, but with Will pressed against him he can feel it as well as hear it. He hadn't intended it to be so fast, but William's determination had taken him by pleasant surprise, and he thinks the evening is still young enough.

Will hums in response tilting his head to fit firmer into Hannibal's grip.

"Yet." He replies, but his tone is soft, the smile clear and genuine riding underneath. It's like a promise, a quiet, reassuring offer of more later. He doesn't want to explain that it's different for the way it was so passionate and fast, but not fast to suggest bad. He can't remember the last time he came so quickly with such intensity as to make him see white, and it doesn't matter, because his mind is sluggish and numb and his body trembles lightly from the final remains of adrenaline fluttering through his system.

Will tries to dredge up a feeling of victory at having gotten Hannibal Lecter to such a state, to being so open and trusting and almost vulnerable with him, he tries to convince himself that the plan was off to just as good a start as his initial infiltration had been. But nothing comes up beyond the comfortable weight of Hannibal's hand in his hair, the way he can feel his heart beating under his palm. He sighs, muscles like water, and forces himself to even attempt to pretend this was for the FBI, for the case, for the takedown.

"Do you mind if I stay?" he asks quietly.

Hannibal discovers, belatedly, now that he can process it, that William's hair feels almost exactly how he'd thought it might. It's silky and smooth and the ends are sharp where they

have been recently trimmed. It's a contrast, a detail that cements this as real. Yet, he allows, though he says nothing to confirm or deny. There is time enough.

"I would prefer if you did," Hannibal answers, and he stretches vaguely underneath Will's touch. "We should bathe, and then eat. You've thrown off my schedule thoroughly."

His tone is amused, without the faintest hint of anger, his expression soft, his muscles slack beneath Will's touch. He knows he shouldn't let his guard down so thoroughly, but they are co-conspirators in this. Even if Hannibal is not supposed to know how far outside of William's territory this should be, there is enough danger around this that they now both have a sort of hold on each other.

He makes no move to stir for a long few moments, content to push his fingers through the soft curls, to feel them both grow cooler. Sleep is very tempting.

Will arches into the touch like a cat, all smooth lines and gentle pressure, and smiles.

“We should bathe, then eat,” he agrees, not moving to get up yet either, “And your assigned schedule for the day was over. I keep your ledger, I know what I was interrupting.”

They fall silent again for a long while, both content to just float in the afterglow and not make the effort to get up. There’s no rush to. But eventually the breeze is a little too cold for comfort on Will’s skin, and he untangles himself gently from Hannibal’s grip on his hair and shifts up to rest on his arms over him a moment. He cocks his head, allows himself to take in how relaxed Hannibal is, how he looks younger and less burdened by stupidity and business and meetings. Will slides his leg over him so he’s straddling him properly and for a moment just rests there, still watching him, still silently taking in every detail.

Then, just as slowly, he continues the movement as though he never paused, and gets off Hannibal again and stands.

“Luke-warm showers will be easier to handle with company, I’ll admit.” He murmurs.

"You know I keep to habits as well," Hannibal agrees, and after Will passes over him in a moment of tightly touching hips and the boneless way their bodies fit together before he smiles in amusement at the thought that Will believed Hannibal would not have the latest in electrically heated plumbing.

He follows after to his feet, arches his eyebrows and tilts his head in a 'wait and see' fashion, and leads Will into the master suite bathroom to show off the wonders of what his station bought.

In the steam is clearly written the sorts of pleasures that will keep leading Will back to his hand.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> Non-domestic domesticity, not-quite-angry angry sex, denial on both sides, and... Winston.

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys! Enjoy some more lovely delicious smutty goodness till next week. Thank you guys so so much for your constant support, we would love to hear your comments if you have the time and desire to write them.

Will spent three nights a week – on average – at the apartment. Mostly the entire weekend and Wednesdays, to keep the standing appointment, but occasionally it would vary. He only went home for Winston, to spend time with his dog who grew more and more used to his master coming home smelling a little foreign, and to reassure him that he wasn't about to abandon him like Winston had been before.

The rest of Will's work remained the same, checking accounts and filing them, seeking out potential partners and acquisitions as requested, taking care of the cleaning, and sometimes accompanying Hannibal to social gatherings as his accountant and occasional broker. Those became both increasingly more regular and more difficult to deal with, simply because one look from either of them and the rest of the evening would crawl.

Will learned quickly that Hannibal was completely fascinated with touch. More specifically, with what his touch could – and did – do to Will. They slept tangled in sheets and limbs, surprisingly comfortable and oddly domestic. It was not uncommon for Will to be greeted with a slow slide of palm against his back and lower, it was not uncommon for Hannibal to find himself pinned by Will's meditative expression as he was working, baiting and tempting him to come close enough before simply looking away as though bored.

Will's still impressed with himself he didn't mess up the account he'd been forced to work on when Hannibal had finally had enough and bent him over the desk, though the signature at the bottom was slightly tremulous and near-illegible.

He gets used to the routine of making the man coffee and leaving the mug if he's not yet home, steaming quietly near his own as he waited, book in hand, at the counter. He gets used to Hannibal being more relaxed around him, enough to let his sense of humor shine through

on particularly good days, a sense of humor Will highly appreciates and finds himself endeavouring to bring out more often.

He gets used to the idea that this isn't for the job, and at night, alone in his freezing and tiny apartment with Winston snuffling quietly at his feet, the thought eats away at him. It's a month since Chicago, and he has nothing to show for it but some bruises still fading on his stomach and inner thighs.

Spring melts to summer, and they leave the city behind for the summer house in Nantuxent. The work remains constant, the accounts need adjustment as before, but now Will can do it with his feet buried in warm grass as Winston has the time of his life running around the enormous property. And this should worry him most, the unbelievable domesticity of this. But he lets himself forget, lets himself go when Hannibal pulls him away with just a brush of his fingers through his hair, a gentle tug at the end implying he wants him to follow. And he lets himself enjoy the touches, the way their bodies press together close enough to forget where one ends and the other begins, the shallow thrusts that hit exactly where they aim and drive Will to incoherent sobbing for more and mercy and air.

He lets himself sleep.

But despite all that, he never stops looking.

Time has not passed this quickly for Hannibal in years, he thinks, standing quiet on the beach that practically laps up against the long porch that leads down from the house to it. At high tide the waves devoured the strip of sand and left off only at the last set of marble stairs that would become wet and treacherous.

He had grown used to the crawl, he discovers, to the slow uphill grind that had taken place since black Thursday and eaten away what remaining years of his youth that the war had not. He was old enough to properly remember the twenties, and he had been affluent and enough of a climber to have seen all the feral wildness in people, desperate to claw their way back from horror with an overabundance of everything they could get that made them feel good.

Twenty years ago, he had stood in very nearly this same spot - he had met many Americans in the war, he had saved some, befriended others, and he had discovered upon visiting some to accept their thanks and make opportunities of them, that there were plenty of opportunities to be had, if one was ever so careful, ever so patient.

And here he was.

This was more dangerous for him than even the stock markets had been, when they had curled up and died and taken the spirit of the twenties and crushed it down into poverty. The grinding wheels turning men to beaten wheat, here and the world over. War had done none of them favors, who did not make their favors themselves. Hannibal had survived that unscathed.

William, however, he might not. He is fairly certain that the man is tamed to his hand, that even at Hannibal's worst he has not flinched away. He has tied himself by the shoelaces, buttoned himself into the excellent clothes and slid into the soft sheets of the role, and found

himself living it. But there was still the tendency to wander in him. On occasion, Hannibal found his gaze distant, and not because it strayed to the night before, or the night approaching but to the further future.

To what he could find to drag Hannibal down from his pedestal and put him where the law believed he should be. Hannibal has considered jail, and he wonders, with the waves lapping over his bare feet as he arches his arm effortlessly and tosses a green, soaking tennis ball back into the sea for the brown, soaking dog that keeps returning it to him, how much worse that might hurt William at this point.

This had started as a tool, as a convenience and a control both, but Hannibal had found himself easing into it, had found it at first enjoyable and then easy. Comfortable. Perhaps it was his age telling him to calm further - though his attitude hadn't been excitable since he was a child. Suggesting he allow himself this much family, though he had never been interested in any of the rest.

His arm swings, the ball flies, the dog leaps into the sea and swims strongly, and behind him William sits and watches with the front of his mind, his hands motionless on the paperwork, while the back of his mind turns the numbers again and again and tries to find some discrepancy. He can't help himself, Hannibal realizes, as the dog turns in the ocean with the green trophy in his mouth and brings it back to Hannibal again, who will only fling it out into the gentle waves. William was forced to swim circles between where he wanted to be and pleasure and instinct drove him to keep chasing it until one day he'd run it down and then sink his teeth in and hold tight.

Hannibal isn't sure he'll know what to do with it when he has it, but he's equally certain the man won't let go.

Safe upon the solid rock, the ugly houses stand, he thinks, come and see my shining palace built upon the sand.

Hannibal keeps paperwork here but not much. He has, again, a safe in the closet that Will has regarded when he opened it to get dressed in the mornings, but Will has never tried to open it. The summer has always been too tempting, bringing his work outside and keeping him there for the day. His mind, however, returns to it often, that safe, and wonders what Hannibal keeps in there that he can’t at the apartment.

It’s worrying that the more time Will spends here, the heavier the thoughts weigh that perhaps he shouldn’t try the safe, that he should leave its secrets, make an excuse about being unable to open it. He had anticipated this case closed in a month, it has been five. His failure to save the life of the man he had brought into this mess still had Will waking in a sweat, heart hammering against his ribs. If it had been planned, it had been a very effective conditioning against Will calling more information in again. he hadn’t picked up the phone to try since.

But then, he hadn’t found anything more.

He watches Hannibal get the ball from Winston, the dog sending sheets of water flying with his excited bouncing and yelping for another game. He follows the arc of the ball into the water and smiles at the way his dog crashes muzzle first into the sea and paddles quickly for

his prize. It’s easy and normal, and because of that his throat presses tighter and he looks away. He lies to himself that he’s not happy, that he doesn’t belong, body and soul, to Hannibal for those few moments when his mind blanks and his voice breaks. He does. They both know that.

Will remembers the statistics to keep himself on track. How many people come into the city every month and how few they can track after. Refugees, gone. Young women and men, missing. It makes him angry and for a time steels his mind against distraction. But only for a time. He checks his calculations against the meticulous graph he’d drawn up and jots down inconsistencies in the margin. He smiles when the sun glaring off his page is muted by a shadow, and shakes his head.

“He won’t stop,” he tells Hannibal, “That ball is his be all and end all. You keep throwing it and he’ll keep retrieving.” He doesn’t look up yet.

"It's funny," Hannibal agrees, sodden tennis ball in hand, "My thoughts were almost exactly the same."

Wolves don't play fetch, but dogs did. It was an effect of all the years in human companionship. He wonders when the game originated, when it slowly began to hardwire itself into the dog psyche. Hannibal winds up and tosses the ball again, watching Winston track it and calculate each movement, second to second, on unerring instinct that leads him to intercept the ball midair before it can even strike the water, though he splashes into it to his chest and turns around sopping to trot back out.

"Do you think he can help fetching, or does he have to, when he sees the ball flying?" Hannibal had found the dog curious, tireless. At first, restless and half wild and his manners were rusty from long days alone in William's apartment - but here with space and freedom, he had bloomed out pleasantly. Hannibal has never enjoyed the company of an animal before, but he has never enjoyed the constant company of anything living before. The dog was part of William's world, and he wanted to integrate both of their worlds together.

His hand settles on a sopping head when the dog comes back and leaves the ball at his feet, and Hannibal simply picks it up, and offers it back, crouching. It was enough - Winston was panting and dripping, tongue lolling and eyes bright. For Hannibal's trouble and compassion, he shakes dog smelling oceanwater all over the man.

Will draws a line under a calculation but still doesn’t look up as he thinks. It’s an interesting notion, whether or not a dog chooses to chase a ball or feels obligated to. The fact that the metaphor is very close to his situation is either evidence of how tense Will’s mind is nearing the situation or how subtle Hannibal can be. Perhaps it’s neither. Most likely it’s both.

“I think he knows the joy you get at having the ball returned,” he muses out loud, carefully folding the page he’s working on underneath the others and starting on the next report, “So he brings it back, vicariously absorbing your pleasure to become his own.” His mouth quirks a little and he crosses out a mistake, rewriting it as Hannibal kneels to pass the ball to Winston. Then he carefully places the pen between his teeth and holds the reports away, a second before Winston shakes himself dry with a resounding, joyful bark.

Hannibal makes a disgusted sound but does not otherwise retaliate. "That I suppose he can't help."

“Or he’s choosing to do it to reciprocate.” Will suggests with a very amused smile, once the pen is no longer keeping his teeth carefully pressed around it, “Make you feel his joy by sharing it.” he folds the report up and recaps the pen before standing, giving Hannibal a smirk as he stands over him for the moment, the other still kneeling with a wince of disgust on his face.

“You smell like him.” he comments, and moves to make his way inside.

"Hardly my fault," Hannibal laments, rising. He pulls the towel William had laid over the back of the sun chair to keep his skin from contacting the heated metal frame, and drops it over the dog to wring what parts of the water he can out of the dog's coat before he's allowed inside to spread sandy pawprints on the wooden and marble floors that marked decadence that no longer seemed to fit into this world.

It was still impolite to not minimize the mess for the housekeepers, even if it leaves Hannibal thoroughly coated in shed hair and with grimy, salt-covered hands.

He steps in behind William a few moments later, ascending the marble steps up to the top of the terrace, the dog running ahead to be with his proper master. "You have always smelled like dog," Hannibal informs, frowning at the mess of wet fur clinging to his forearms. "And I've never complained."

He smiles, however, and it is faintly playful. The time outside the city has relaxed him, the memories this place seems to hold have soothed him down into something slightly gentler. If William were not holding the reports he had spent all day growing brown and working on, Hannibal would have toppled him into the pool wholesale for the actions of his dog and his words both.

Instead he simply trails his eyes from the pool, to the man standing beside it, waiting for Hannibal before he pulls one of the folding French doors open to let them both in. Hannibal generously does not drop the wet, dog hair filled towel onto William's completed work, but he does drop it over the man's head as he heads past. "I'll have to change," he explains, as if nothing had happened. "Perhaps you should, too."

Will ducks his head with the unexpected weight and frowns, slowly raising his eyes to watch Hannibal walk past him. Winston whines by his side and Will quiets him with a brisk fricative. It’s always refreshing to see Hannibal relax, but there’s something about just how relaxed he is that makes Will convince himself that the reports can wait. He walks through to the other room to set the papers into the top drawer of the desk – he’s found that leaving them elsewhere finds the wind tossing them around – before shaking his head enough for the towel to slip to his shoulders.

He’s lived with Winston so long that the smell of dog is just normal to him. It’s neither divine nor repulsive; he just doesn’t sense it anymore. He rubs Winston behind the ears and sends the dog away, he’s certain he’ll find him by the pool later, tail dipped into the cool water, the rest of his body languid and warm in the sun. Then he makes his way back to follow

Hannibal to his room. Not theirs. Will hasn't allowed himself to fall far enough for the room to become theirs.

"Dog saliva is healing," he comments, knowing better than to flip the towel off his shoulders in the room proper, he makes his way to the bathroom, "One of these days, smelling like a dog could be the thing that saves you."

He deposits the towel in the hamper and leans over the sink to look at himself in the mirror. His hair isn't much longer but it's wavier, coming alive in wild, ridiculous curls if it dries after he's swum in the sea. His skin is darker but only enough to notice, a slightly softer tan that Will doesn't want to develop into anything darker, his eyes are bright and the bags underneath are missing, leaving just smooth delicate skin there, that he runs the pads of his fingers over.

He thinks again about giving up the operation. Agents have been lost before, in action, converted over by women and alcohol… surely he can become a statistic. Will frowns at the mirror, thinking of the people they have never been able to track down, of the other operations that are hurting more than they're helping. He rubs his face and sighs. He can't give it up. no matter how tempting the notion is. He will keep looking, and pretend like it's still easy to.

"Dog saliva is healing if you are a dog, perhaps." Hannibal answers, with a wry look. "But I'd rather Bactine to keep a wound from fouling."

It's far more likely his previous medical experience will save him, though if he gets into a situation where he needs saving that badly it's unlikely that anything will actually make that much of a difference. When his enemies finally believe they can kill him, if they ever get so bold, they will be sure not to make mistakes.

Hannibal scrubs his arms to the elbows, as if he were washing for surgery, and with his fingers still running soapy water he undoes the buttons for his shirt - here he has allowed a sort of dressing down into lighter fabrics, in colors he normally eschews - and it follows the towel into the hamper before he catches William leaning into the counter speculatively peering at himself in the mirror. Hannibal pins him against the vanity with his own body, forearms sliding under Will's upraised arms to plant palms-flat on the countertop and he eases his mouth over the back of the man's neck, allowing himself to be tempted.

"You can leave the work behind a few days," Hannibal suggests, of the man's sigh. He means of course, work of both natures, but he keeps his tone light enough to only mean what he should mean. "Business won't pick up again until it cools some."

Will hums, content, and presses back against Hannibal in gentle reciprocation.

"If I listened to you every time you suggested that, I would be knee-deep in accounts in a week." He murmurs, but there's no heat in his voice either, he tilts his head to give Hannibal better access and drops his hands to rest against the sink, inside of Hannibal's frame.

If William listened to him even once when he suggested it, he might stop hearing the suggestion. Hannibal does not lean too hard on the subject, he knows William has a hungry,

active mind and it's all he can do at times to keep him distracted and busy, sated and sleepy enough to give Hannibal enough moments where no eyes are watching him to conduct what it is he needs to conduct.

Since Will had chosen to engage in this, since his blatant declaration of intent, there have been very few nights that Will has gone to sleep without the sweet afterglow pulling him under, and few mornings he hasn't woken up sore in one part of his body or another. It's addictive as it is surprising, and on some level Will still feels a strange surge of pride in knowing he can make someone so hungry for him that they can't contain it.

He pushes back a little more and rolls his shoulders, at once arching his back and curving his neck with the motion. He's learned to control his movements in such a way as to elicit a response, has found himself enjoying discovering what each new touch brought out in him and how old familiar ones can be twisted into something spectacular. He lets out a sigh and looks up to meet Hannibal's eyes in the mirror.

"And what would I do with my few days of freedom, Hannibal, that I don't already do?"

Hannibal works a wet line down from behind Will's ear, and he can smell the beach on him, taste the lotion he works into his skin to keep it from burning - a palmy taste, pasty, but underneath there's still the skin he's come to recognize.

"Put the ledgers down and avoid thinking of numbers," Hannibal supposes, and one of his hands lifts from the surface of the vanity as Will arches his body against him in a way that they've both learned will provoke a reaction. Hannibal is not used to being a servant to his whims, he is not used to keeping temptation so close to hand and he feels at times as if he were truly out of control - and by comparison, perhaps, he was.

The suggestion is more properly 'surrender entirely to what I'm offering', but Hannibal doesn't voice it that way, not in words. Instead his hands curl tight at Will's waist, and then move up to start undoing his shirt. "Fish on the ocean, for once."

Will hums again and smiles, eyes flicking down to watch Hannibal's fingers work the buttons.

"I'd have to go out quite far," he murmurs, "Stay all day on the water. Take my time. Enjoy it." he leans back just a little and presses his hips against the cool marble of the bench. "The idea is a tempting one, perhaps I'll borrow the boat today, while it's still light." He pushes back more, knowing he won't get far even if he tries, but the expression he expects is amusing enough to make him push.

It's recent that Will's started talking back in these situations, making it more difficult than just tugging him along. Not because he no longer enjoys it – far from it – but because there's a strange powertrip that comes with baiting Hannibal and watching him take it. They know each other well enough, now, to know when to push for one thing or accept another. There are still scenarios that worry Will enough to steer away from them, and still many more he is almost aching to try but refuses to voice.

“Or, perhaps,” he amends when he’s held from moving more, and instead tilts his head back against Hannibal’s shoulder, no longer watching the mirror, “I’ll work the nights. Not waste the daylight summer.” It’s not meant as a jibe, he knows Hannibal goes about his business when he thinks Will is out cold in bed, blissed out and exhausted. It’s only been a few times Will has managed to even get one eye open to notice, but he’s found it a constant.

"I deal in tricky timezones," Hannibal apologizes, holding William more or less in place, though he lets the man back off from the counter enough so there won't be any painful pressure. He lifts one hand to push at the bared throat under the open shirt, while the other slides down to insinuate between the edge of the counter and low on Will's belly.

He has never been this bad at resisting taking bait, or refusing what was laid out for him. William was already fishing, and he knew how to set the hook, Hannibal thinks. But he doesn't know how close to the surface of the water the pressure on the other end of the line. Hannibal thinks that if he keeps the pressure constant, he won't even know when he slips below the water line.

He thinks, perhaps, that this time, he'll let William take the lead - he has sensed at times that there is an undercurrent he holds to himself, a certain affliction of nerves. Hannibal palms him firmly, once, and then backs away all of a sudden. It's a deliberate tease, as he moves from the wash room, and into the bedroom beyond.

"I can have the boat ready in an hour, but we won't beat the evening tide back," Hannibal's voice trails after, and if William isn't fast, he won't catch the man before he reaches his closet with intent to dress again in clothes unsoiled by wet dog. "If the night stays calm, we can spend it in the cabin. If you aren't prone to seasickness."

Will grasps the marble as Hannibal steps away, to keep himself steady as well as patient. The words reach him and he laughs quietly, shaking his head before pushing away and following Hannibal out.

“You don’t seem like the kind of man who enjoys fishing,” he tells him, walking past him to sit on the edge of the bed, “There’s a particular brand of patience that comes with fishing, an endless disappointment. Hours upon hours of waiting in silence for nothing to happen.” a very apt description of Will’s entire assignment so far. But he’d pushed. He’d adjusted the lure to be more tempting.

“It’s unlike a hunt. There is no stalking, no planning, no direct kill. It’s just waiting.” He offers a smile and removes the shirt Hannibal so graciously unbuttoned for him, pressing it into a ball between his hands as he continues to watch the man dress, lets his eyes slide to the safe again just from habit, before glancing away. Truth be told, he’s warning Hannibal away because he genuinely believes the man would not enjoy the activity. The pleasure and peace it brings Will is not the same as what it would bring Hannibal. They are, perhaps, more like hunter and fisherman than a simple jest at the fact.

Will gets up and walks closer, ducking his head to breathe gently against Hannibal’s shoulder. It’s mid-afternoon and if they leave now they won’t make the tide, as Hannibal suggested. Most of the afternoon it would take them to get far enough out to be a decent fishing ground, then dusk and the cold that falls over the ocean at night.

“You still smell like dog.” He informs him casually.

Hannibal is very patient, but he is also, when he springs, quite direct. He is excellent at laying in wait, but fishing is not a predator's game - it is that of the changeable omnivore, the opportunist. It suits William very well, he thinks, and he will let the man have his dissuasion. Especially when he saw those eyes flick toward his safe, quick as the gesture was.

Hannibal makes a low noise of agreement. "What would you rather I smelled like?"

Hannibal momentarily feels tamed - dangerously so. For a long minute, he's not sure who's the one trapped in the endless cycle of retrieve and repeat. He consoles himself that he is not yet in handcuffs, so he is still in charge, feeling Will's breath fan over his shoulder. He possessed, he was possessed. He supposed that sort of trade was required to pull in something as unique as William.

Will grins at the amusing question.

“The ocean,” he suggests, letting his shirt fall to the floor and mirroring the gesture Hannibal started in the bathroom by placing his hands on Hannibal’s hips and just steadying him. “Autumn in the city. Fresh-pressed suits. Exertion.” He mouths at his shoulder a moment, enjoying the strange but comfortable reversal of roles that Hannibal has allowed. He’s never wanted to or needed to snatch control – not here, not between them like this – but he’s enjoying the idea of turning the concept of control to one of protection or comfort. He doubts Hannibal gets such from anyone else.

Hannibal straightens, leans back, he feels tired. "Why do you stay?" he asks, curiously, in a moment of weakness. He doesn't expect to get a real answer - he thinks he knows the real answer - but he wants, once he's asked, to know how William will answer.

This question gives Will pause. He doesn’t expect it and for a moment he just hovers, lips above skin, breath fanning out over it before he resumes, drawing his lips up higher, nosing at the soft hair at the base of Hannibal’s neck and up until he can press gentle teeth to the thin skin behind his ear.

“Because you want me here.” He says quietly, stepping closer so they’re pressed chest to back, hip to hip, his hands shift a little to curve over Hannibal’s stomach, one sliding up to draw cool, lingering circles around a nipple, the other tracing the line the waistband runs against his skin. “And I want to be here.”

The answer is simple enough that Hannibal's exhale, sparked first by the teeth on his skin, turns into a breathy chuckle. They both know it is more than that, they both know better, but Hannibal knows when to let something lay. There are times for challenging lies, for trying to find where and how they are supposed to fit together when all of their secrets have come transparent.

"Is that all," he answers, and he lifts his hands to cover William's where they're moving. His tone isn't quite light enough for sheer amusement - it's almost amazed. They both want this. He wanted to be here - Hannibal isn't sure he'll ever trust that notion fully, but it ratchets something over in him, and he turns in Will's arms and steps into it to take him off balance, to

push him against the closet wall, smashing bagged clean suits between him and the surface, uncaring.

This time, his teeth find William's neck hard, possessive and defensive and still intent to mark. His hands curl against Will's ribs, just under, and they own too - it's not a rejection of what Will had been doing - comforting, soothing - but an expression of how suddenly impatient Hannibal is with himself, for allowing whether this will work or not to worry him.

The outcome will be what it will be. He shouldn't dread it, no matter what it means in the end. That means he's too close, too attached - his strings are being pulled in reverse.

Will stumbles a little before his back lands against something soft and crinkling, and then Hannibal's mouth is against him and it doesn't actually matter that he's destroying the meticulously pressed garments, that once Hannibal blinks the lust out of his eyes he'll be annoyed at himself for damaging them. In a way, it's telling, but Will doesn't think on it, just swallows hard and tilts his head back and lets out a quick, harsh breath.

He's known he's too invested for a while. Since he woke up one night, sated and sore, Hannibal's arm heavy over him, and thought only that he should train Winston not to jump up for when he finally meets the man. He's known and it has scared him. Because the closer he's allowed, the less he wants to find something. The more chance he has, to look in the safe, to explore the paperwork Hannibal hadn't given him before, to put together a solid case with the man being out as often as he is, the less Will wants them.

His hands find Hannibal's pants with practiced efficiency and tug at the catch, teeth grit as the pressure of teeth increases and draws a sound from him. Is that all? If only. If only Will didn't have to find more evidence and call it in. If only he didn't have to watch this man go to jail. If only he didn't have to endure being forced away from visiting. It's not all. It didn't start as this. It started as deception, as an anger play on a weakness he could sense. It started as a tactic. Still is a tactic. It's just a tactic, nothing more.

"That's all," he moans quietly, hands finally past the light summer fabric and against the thin barrier of underwear. And it sounds less and less like a lie.

For the moment, Hannibal allows himself to believe it, with Will breathing hot and earnest into his ear, with the knowledge that this, at least, this that they shared wasn't just about having a hook in to capture Hannibal on any charge he could. Perhaps Hannibal was being too paranoid, too cautious - perhaps he had already won William over and all he had to do was extend faith and watch the man take it up and bloom with it.

Hannibal's voice eases out of him when Will gets his hand on him, even through fabric, and his body responds to Will's fingers, eagerly into the familiar touch. Will knows him, more of him than almost anyone else, and what he has are the parts Hannibal holds dear from others when he plays at the rest. He is not kind, rarely gentle, usually brusque and cool toward his associates.

But William, he allows to tear his professionalism away, the same way he has determinedly torn at what William held aloft in front of him as a mask. He can still work this way, the advantage is still in his favor, even when he's allowing himself to voice growls against the

skin held between his teeth as he works in turn - hurried, but not frantic, he is never frantic - to get the clasp of William's pants open, to get his hand on the man's cock so they're on equal footing and neither is pushing the other off balance without leverage between.

Will's breath hitches to match the quiet sound from Hannibal and he brings his other hand up to grab a handful of Hannibal's hair and tug it, hard enough to feel, hard enough to mirror the bite that he is sure will leave a bruise that will not fade for days, if then. This is just as hungry, just as powerful as the sex had been the first few weeks, but there is also something so vulnerable underlying it, for both of them, now that they're both trapped at this impasse and aware of it. Will is sure, deep enough to bury, that Hannibal knows who he is, what the nature of this game is, what can happen. and yet he lets him in, has let him this far.

He pushes up on his toes as Hannibal's hand starts a teasing, unrelenting rhythm against him, and runs the side of his nail up along the vein on the underside of Hannibal's cock, pressing enough to feel the man's muscles loosen in a moment of blissful abandon. And then the tension returns and Will smiles, grins, teeth bared and contented until they, too, part on a loud and helpless sound of want. They stay trapped, both stuck in a loop of pressure and demand and neither giving in.

And just as Will felt guilt over the inevitable betrayal, he feels anger at Hannibal's blatant, forward manipulation. Trying to mould Will as surely as Will was trying to avoid being moulded. Offering him luxuries, opportunities, quiet hints that led nowhere… the unbelievably hateful task of having to interrogate a man Will had gotten into danger, and then letting Will hear as he died, the shot ringing in the otherwise silent morning. He's angry and he's helpless and his fingers tighten in Hannibal's hair just a fraction more. He wants to bring him to the same level of helpless confusion that Will has been suffering for weeks. He wants to make the man bend until he reaches his limit and can see over the edge. He wants, he realizes, he wants.

The harder edge to William's grip is new and angry. He can feel it burning and taut in the man's muscle, and finally he has to break his hold on a gasp. Instinctive. The hand on his dick is almost secondary to the sensation that is pulling him down and back, and he goes, tips his head back to ease some of the pressure as he slides down.

The gesture is not quite the same as it had been that first time, where it had still retained his power and been about teaching and guiding, where it had been a gentle reeling in. This time it's William doing the pulling, hard, and Hannibal goes along, lets the line between them grow less and less, because he relents, he goes down to his knees this time with his neck bared and his eyes hot, and his hands clawing lines down Will's sides and pulling at the man's pants.

The anger is circulating through both of them like blood at this moment, and it had started soft and playful, but they had both caught themselves at it, they had become accustomed enough to it to question themselves. Hannibal leans in and presses his teeth into William's stomach next, low, as he gets Will's pants off in a tugging, yanking rush.

Will relents his grip as Hannibal sinks down in front of him, and it's such a change it jars him. This is a predator, a dangerous, dangerous man, and he doesn't lose that, doesn't let his eyes go soft or drop them down, he's just as angry as Will is, vibrating with it and the need to

express it. and yet he goes. He lets. And Will’s tough grip slackens to a caress, around the side of Hannibal’s face and down to cup under his jaw, just watching him.

There is such power in submission.

He hisses at the feeling of teeth against his stomach and sucks it in on reflex, tilting his hips away from the wall so Hannibal can yank the pants down, out of the way, to be forgotten and found later once the madness wore off, when the breeze had blown it away. The bruise on his neck throbs and Will wants more still. More marks, more memories, more to remember for later… he wants to leave Hannibal knowing, remembering that he is just as much Will’s as Will is his, and he wants to do it without leaving any marks at all.

He wants to say something but his mind is busy. Filled with the white noise of anticipation, the anger of uncertainty, and a mad, cold hope that they can come out of this unscathed. He strokes his fingers under Hannibal’s chin and slides his hand to splay against the back of his neck.

Hannibal watches Will back for a long moment, his eyes dark and not quite threatening, but promising. Neither of them is like to forget this, though they may put it down and settle the rug over and tread carefully for knowing that it exists.

Hannibal strokes Will's freed cock twice, hard, almost too rough in a dry fist. It's just enough to make sure he's all the way hard, that he's paying full attention when Hannibal opens his mouth and takes what his fist doesn't curl steadyingly around into his mouth, with room enough to work his tongue. At first he presses his tongue flat and sucks, hard enough to make Will's fingers curve into his muscles, though whether it's encouragement or in mimic of the pressure being exerted on him Hannibal doesn't honestly care.

His free hand splays up, slides flat-palm up the back of his thigh and then his fingers bend and his nails catch skin in long lines on the way down, marking again, trying to stay this side of desperate.

Will refuses for this to be over as quickly as it had the first time. When he’d been inexperienced and unsure, fumbling to reciprocate and worried that his entire plan would go to hell and he’d be left in the cold. He groans, arching his neck then ducking his head as Hannibal swallows him down, drags the hot points of a mark down the back of his thigh. It’s quick and messy and hot he wants more, he wants to see if he can bring Hannibal down to the helpless collection of sounds Will had made in the apartment, with his back pressed against the impossibly high windows.

He feels the tell-tale heat pooling in the pit of his stomach and tugs Hannibal’s hair again, not a warning, this time, but a request to back away. An order, when the first tug yields nothing but a louder sound from Will and Hannibal’s clever tongue unrelenting. He pulls him back and sinks to his knees before he can be distracted again, pushing his mouth against Hannibal’s in a harsh, unforgiving gesture, an angry gesture. Anger at the manipulation, at the difficulties posed, at the circles Hannibal has made him run to get something, anything, and even that ending up a false trophy.

He pulls back and swallows, jaw working a moment before he slides his hand to Hannibal’s shoulder and pushes him back, follows the movement and crawls over him until he’s lying flat and Will kisses him again, a pressing of lips indicating he should stay as he is, not move more than Will wants him to. And it’s undignified, something – Will relishes – Hannibal would never have allowed a few weeks ago, lying half out of the closet in the master bedroom of his enormous, near-abandoned summer house, being made to stay still by someone who is out to destroy him.

Was.

Will removes his own pants first, the rest of the way, and tosses them, before working to get Hannibal similarly naked, similarly vulnerable and open. And down. He still can’t believe he’s lying under him because he made him, because Will wants him to. That makes him angry too, that he won’t fight this, that he just lets Will have this because he wants Will to have it, as though it’s just another form of control that Will can’t help surrender to. It’s a loop, an endless loop.

Will swallows, lips parted and eyes closed, fingers curled into fists against the carpet before he blinks his eyes open and stretches his fingers free, rolling his body in a fluid motion to move back up enough to capture Hannibal’s lips again, gentler but by no means weaker. He keeps him down. He feeds him reassurances but he says nothing.

Pinned by Will's body, by his commanding gaze, by the fact that he hasn't ever experienced this before, Hannibal lies back and lets dignity be damned. Here is another part of himself that William has kept separate and secret, perhaps something he had never intended to spool out and allow to be a part of this ruse. The further Hannibal pulls him - and here he pulls by simply relenting, by laying back and rolling his own hips up to let Will get his pants up and with more motion than is strictly required for it to push the backs of Will's own hands up against his own body - the more of him he sees.

The more genuine Will becomes to pursue Hannibal, the more he has to give, the closer he becomes to buying falsity with reality. He already has almost all of Hannibal's reality - this is only fair.

Hannibal huffs out a low breath against Will's mouth, and then in a gesture that was deliberate and obedient, he lifts his own hands above his head in a parody of bare defencelessness, and crosses his hands at the wrists as if he were bound, and he takes what Will gives in rolls of his body, in presses of his mouth, and he doesn't spare him the bitter taste of his own precum striped across Hannibal's tongue in evidence that fades further every time their mouths push together.

Hannibal stays down, but he does not stay still, shifting one knee up along Will's side and using it to roll his hips up, before he breaks the kiss to breathe, and turns his head to bite again, to leave a matching mark on the other side of Will's neck.

"This angry?" he asks, his voice low and goading. "Have you not yet caught what you wanted?"

Will notes the gesture, lets his eyes travel slowly up the taut muscles and thin, breakable skin, but doesn't touch, doesn't do anything. He shifts, rolling his hips down into the motion Hannibal started, and gasps at the bite, sharper than the other, lighter in the long-run, more painful now. And then the words… the words that slide under Will's skin like a blade and peel him away. He bares his teeth and meets his eyes, and for a moment, one brief, uninhibited moment, Will wants to tell him. Wants to see the look on his face when he knows, that the man above him, the man who had surrendered to him, had allowed so much, had hidden so much, was going to be the man to see him destroyed.

He leans close, letting his breath raise goosebumps against Hannibal's throat and up behind his ear.

"I don't need marks," he murmurs, body poised just above him, a tease and a warning of what could happen and what could end. "To know I've caught you."

And it's so satisfying, such a hot unfurling in his chest of something that shouldn't be there, something that sets his mind reeling and his heart hammering and Will pulls back, composed again, words forgotten but for Hannibal's expression detailing them again and again. He slides lower, swallows Hannibal as the other had distracted him, bringing him to the point where his body bends and slides on its own accord, when the movement is unplanned and uncontrolled. A distraction for Hannibal and for himself, to let the wild thing awake in his mind return to its cave, to quiet.

That echo of feral confidence that has woken in William is terrifying and yet still feels like a small victory - it was weeks and months of frustration and careful cultivation to show Will this exact point in the human soul when victory and satisfaction becomes more important than method, becomes more important than what you are becoming.

Hannibal hisses his approval, and twists, but he does not free his hands from their invisible bonds, even as Will drives him closer and relentless toward the edge and his breath is running out of him ragged as he watches through mostly closed eyes. He can see the marks purpling against the working cords of Will's neck, flexing taut and relaxing in turns as he works his mouth in a relentless rhythm, before Hannibal has to close his eyes as he twists, on the other end of the line for once.

He doesn't ask 'please', but his voice crashes against his bared teeth and he arches himself before he drags in a breath and tries to find his restraint again. Perhaps he is caught, perhaps he is only tangling himself further every time he does this, but he doesn't think William has ever had anything quite like Hannibal on the other side of the line. Let him think he had a victory, had nearly gotten his hands on exactly what he wanted, as he had thought so often before.

This time, in this, Hannibal will not slide out of his hands at the very last second. It's the first solid victory he can hand over.

Will notes the tension, the increase in movement and silent demands, the way Hannibal doesn't allow his voice free but it fights through anyway, and there is so much power here, it's fighting and meshing and twisting into place. He pulls off for just a moment, licking up slowly from base to tip as he catches his breath and curls his fingers around Hannibal to keep

him on edge as Will just takes in his body. The flush of skin, the tremors, the way he's still holding his arms over his head despite Will never asking him to or putting them there himself.

This is as open as he would ever get Hannibal, he suspects, and on some level he feels painfully saddened by the fact. But he remembers that the only time Hannibal has Will honest, completely, fully honest, is when he's on the verge of ecstasy and his mind blanks out. if he ever wanted to know anything from him, then would be the time to ask, when Will is panting to catch his breath, eyes usually closed or at half mast, lips parted wide to breathe before the corners tilt up and he shows his teeth in a smile. That's when Will could reveal his soul. He wonders if Hannibal is the same. If it's even fair to consider sex an interrogation technique.

But with them, nothing is rarely fair.

He takes Hannibal back into his mouth slowly, taking his time to swallow around him and get him as deep as he can, eyes closing with the pressure and effort but staying still as long as he can before pulling back to where he's comfortable and sucking harder, determined to bring the man's mind to a stop as he had done so often for Will, determined, at least, in his anger, to give him that mercy.

His eyes slide open at the absence, and then closed again as his lips pull back from his teeth and he lets himself be tipped when Will decides that's what he wants and when. He's so used to holding and fighting to keep himself utterly under his own command that it's difficult at first, but Will is unrelenting and lets Hannibal push his hips up into the heat of his fist and mouth.

He does, twice, fighting for it, as much to keep his mind down and let it happen as it was to keep his voice to himself. In the end, one wins, the other wins free as his release takes him, and his thoughts slide away. Tension builds - snaps, his voice comes low in his throat but it's Will's name in a choked tone that wins its way free before his thoughts pour out of him in echo to the physical aspect.

Hannibal sags back, panting, and surrenders there, too. with his throat working dry and his hands at last coming free as he forgets they are supposed to be held. His mind is a sheet of white heat and softly settled pleasure. He knows the rush, but the intensity is unusual.

The pliancy is one thing they share in common, one unspoken limit that they might not cross over the top of. They have never violated this quiet, open place with questions - but if Hannibal were ever to answer them without thought to how carefully he should twist his words. Without thought to drawing the bead on William's heart and pulling the trigger the same way William thought of setting the hook and winding the reel, it was in this breathless space after.

Hannibal settles his hands on William's shoulders and holds, the anger gone out of him with the rest of the tide.

Will allows it, the silence. He swallows a few times, diluting the bitter sharp taste – he's always swallowed by choice, and used to it enough – before licking his lips and moving to

rest over Hannibal so he can see him. This man who ruins so many lives and who Will doesn't want to see boxed and trapped, despite himself and his conscience. He ducks his head, kissing under his jaw, lightly, keeping to his biting words of earlier and not leaving a single mark on him. He reaches the center of Hannibal's chest before shifting to get up and away, relenting when Hannibal's hands stay heavy against him, and pressing a gentle reassurance to the corner of his mouth. He's not going far.

And he isn't, just far enough to get the bottle he needs and to stretch, rolling his shoulders and feeling the bruises on his neck tug and pull the skin a little. He won't cover them tomorrow. Just let them breathe and see if Hannibal wishes to remember.

When he returns it's as a gentle insinuation into Hannibal's arms again, the anger faded now and replaced with regret and a soft sort of sadness. They're trapped, the both of them, in each other. And perhaps it's a fate worse than death for them both. Will slicks his fingers slowly, shifting back a little and resuming the path his lips had started before, ghosting over the flat, taught stomach and the tiny scars there, down lower and just nuzzling against the gentle curve where leg joins hip.

He doesn't ask if Hannibal has done this before, been on his back for someone else. He doesn't care. Will would take his time regardless of the answer, regardless of the anger – if it still possessed him – or anything else. It's a slow push, careful, and Will lets his eyes return to Hannibal's, meet them, and he bites his lip lightly, in thought, to keep a quiet question at bay that isn't fair but is important. And then he exhales and asks anyway. Asks because he knows he'll get an honest answer.

"Why do you think I stay?"

Hannibal lets out air in a thin, steady stream as Will pushes fingers wet and seeking up against him, and he's reluctant to come back enough to grant him the easy entrance, to give him the opportunity to question, but his eyes are dark and widely pupil as he pulls a knee up again and thinks how very long it has been since he had allowed this before the question captures his attention, and his eyes slide back from wandering over the trailing, limp sleeves of suits in thin plastic.

Will gains entrance with his fingers and an answer in that order and almost the same moment, Hannibal closing his eyes in order to surrender. "You're looking for something," Hannibal suggests, lowly. The words seem to distract him enough to open more easily, splitting his focus between the chemicals already flooding into his system. "A way to not be in anyone's shadow anymore."

There had been some kernel of truth to the story that had bought William's way into the organization - if not as firmly into Hannibal's trust as expected - in the first place. Hannibal shifts so his knees swing wider apart, but it's not quite wanton - willing certainly. "You stay because you're sure you're on the verge of finding it."

Will takes his time, keeping his eyes resolutely on his hand as he stretches and twists gently until Hannibal is more willing, opening up and receiving the attention, back with Will again instead of floating away, allowing this as a favor or a victory, a spoil of a battle. Will curls his fingers, seeking, knowing what he's looking for by the residual memory of the electric,

blissful point of pleasure Hannibal seems to always find in him and use to break Will down. He is rewarded for his efforts by a pleased jerking motion and a sound. Will lets himself smile.

The answer is slow coming but honest, and it hurts more than Will can admit. Just as Hannibal is twisting him, bending him to his will and whim, to his desire for Will to leave his work, his assignment, and invert his morals, Will is using Hannibal as a stepping stone to something bigger, a better position at the FBI, a better job, fame for putting away someone so notorious, so dangerous, and doing it singlehandedly. It is a way to prove himself, Hannibal is, a way to show himself, to show Jack Crawford, his family, that he is better and that he had been.

He doesn't cease his gentle preparation until Hannibal is shifting almost unconsciously into the touches, seeking more of them and deeper. His eyes are still on Will, still dark and blown, and expecting his answer to have a reaction, to have something. Will removes his hand and leans over Hannibal as he strokes himself up, just letting himself take in his expression, his body under him, a sheen of sweat over him, the flush that's still there. Will ducks his head and lines up before leaning over Hannibal to breathe against him, to lick his lips and offer one final truth.

"I don't want to find it." he whispers. And then he pushes in.

Hannibal reaches up as Will leans down, and allows that they have both violated their unspoken agreement this part, this aspect of them, wasn't supposed to be a tool. They had violated that all along, of course, but carefully. Now it is a vessel for the truth, as Hannibal curls his hands over Will's shoulders and arches up.

The stretch isn't easy, it's tight and slow and it drives the breath back out of Hannibal as surely as the words that accompany it. He is not by nature, trusting. It's how he has survived - he keep his business carefully, avoids too much direct contact, legitimizes and launders in a way that keeps the police and feds up at night. He allows that he keeps a very specific fed up at night for entirely different reasons.

The motion comes to a slow apex, Hannibal pushing his hips off the floor and pulling Will down to get them both seated all the way together, before he leans up, and turns his mouth against the man's ear to answer.

"Then I'll do my best never to let you."

Will takes his time to build a rhythm, taking into account every response before adjusting his movements to fit. It's unusual to see Hannibal so open, in a place Will has grown used to occupying, to enjoying occupying, and Will realizes he feels no victory here, no burning desire to gloat. He ducks his head to map the fluttering line of his pulse, down his throat and to his collarbone, and hopes both can live up to their word.

It can't be comfortable for Hannibal, the carpet is soft enough to walk on but perhaps not made for their present activity. Will makes the effort to distract from the discomfort how he can, with unending movement against Hannibal's chest, one hand curling up to stroke through his hair and cradle his head off the floor. He arches into the hold Hannibal has on

him and encourages the other to move how he wants. They don’t speak anymore, they don’t need to, and all the anger finally fades from Will as it had from Hannibal, enough for the gentleness to take over and bring this to something familiar.

Will draws one hand down, skimming the backs of his knuckles down Hannibal’s side and lower to curl his hand under his thigh and raise it up, adjusting the angle just enough to feel, enough to make him smile at the response and kiss under Hannibal’s jaw, pulling away to pant quietly at how good it feels, how welcome the trust is.

The shift brings Hannibal's voice to the back of his throat as it often had in William. Hannibal has never thought of this as the truly inferior position, neither was, but it was less directing, less controlled - so he usually eschewed it in favor of wresting the sounds he was currently making from his partner's lips instead. With William, usually much louder and more enthusiastic. More rewarding.

Hannibal never lets go that far - he can't, not with the wolves waiting in the wings and just to his side always. This is familiar and softer now, though. Now that there was more truth between them - as much as they could have and still keep each other protected from - themselves. From circumstances.

Turning his head he closes his mouth over Will's pulsepoint, just beneath his chin, but now there is no hint of teeth, there is no threat of bruising - he is just holding on while the carpet scratches his back in soft abrasions that will add up over time, but they barely matter. He curls his fingers into Will's hair with one hand, and lets the other slide low over the middle of his back, encouraging. The same as he's always encouraged, the moment William has started to set foot down a path he approves of.

The tender gesture draws a quiet moan from Will, and he turns into it, dropping one hand to claw into the carpet both for balance and to ground himself as he speeds up, moving faster and deeper as the heat in his stomach pools. The release is welcome and he allows himself to loose his voice again, breath and sound playing over damp skin and just as quickly dissipating. He feels heavy, tired in a way he hasn’t been in a while.

Will extricates himself carefully, sitting back and just watching Hannibal in front of him before sighing out a quiet laugh. And that’s all. No mention of the truths they’d come close to unlocking, no words on how the situation ended up playing itself out… just them, together, exhausted and soft. familiar. He draws a hand through his hair before leaning over to kiss Hannibal lightly, a gratitude, perhaps, for forgetting as surely as Will was convincing himself he had. Or perhaps something else.

“We’ll get cold if we stay here,” he murmurs, carding his fingers through Hannibal’s hair just once before shifting to lie next to him.

The closet is half dark with the sun having slid well over the top of the house as they exerted themselves. It leaves the room beyond in a hazy late afternoon glow that near perfectly matches the shade of contentment in Hannibal's mind. That, he supposes is what's most intoxicating about this. The ability to lie still and quiet and unworried about the motivation - he already knows William's, he's already worked to soften it.

With the near strangers he'd allowed in the past, there was never a moment of total surrender like this, never any chance to just breathe out and let go of his thoughts and the wariness about what could hit him here and vulnerable.

"It's August," he reminds, as to the unlikeliness that they will freeze on the floor in their own sweat and sweet exerted smell. But he eases up anyway, carefully stretching himself as he does so, before he reaches out and brushes a thumb apologetically over the bruised spots on Will's neck. "But I think-"

From downstairs, there is the shrilling of the telephone - a device that is usually silent. No one calls Hannibal, though he calls others. Doubly so here at his retreat. William could count the amount of times people had called Hannibal at home on one hand. This is the first time the phone has ever rung here. Hannibal makes a distasteful face and picks himself up, locates his pants.

"No manners at all," he laments, and touches Will again gently before he heads down to attend business. "I'll meet you down at the beach, unless you'd prefer a bath to a swim?" And then he has to turn to head down the stairs and find the phone, still slick with his own cooling sweat.

Will watches him go, takes note of the fact that Hannibal is annoyed by the call but also something else, something more raw; he's scared of it. And it is unusual. Will noticed first when he'd started that his job did not involve the telephone, not answering it or using it unless extremely necessary. He knows Hannibal prefers to talk, face to face, rather than over the phone. The fact that someone called him here…

He watches Hannibal go, resting back on his elbows and smiling at his words. He'd prefer either. He'd enjoy both. He closes his eyes a moment and just rests his head back on a sigh, letting his muscles relax, his breathing even. They were predators matched, he and Hannibal. And perhaps that's why it was such a beautiful thing to just relax, to let go occasionally with each other, to see how much the other could see before drawing the curtain again, blind.

He gets up slowly, walking to the washroom to rinse his face and run cool fingers through his hair to lay it flat. It's August. Months since this was meant to be over, and he's still here. The marks are darker on his neck than he'd thought and Will frowns, rubbing a finger over one as though to rub it away. He leaves the washroom and finds his pants in the closet, slipping them on before adjusting the contents to not look quite like they'd been attacked and closing the door.

Perhaps the call will unravel Hannibal enough to confide more in Will, complain, perhaps, anything to indicate what it was about. He realizes he both wants to know, and will most likely kiss the man into silence if he tries to tell him. the conflict is becoming a familiar feeling, and he descends the stairs with a sigh.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The war has started, and our boys are right in the middle.

Chapter Notes

Endings are hard. Any chapped-ass monkey with a keyboard can poop out a beginning, but endings are impossible. You try to tie up every loose end, but you never can. The fans are always gonna bitch. There's always gonna be holes. And since it's the ending, it's all supposed to add up to something. I'm telling you, they're a raging pain in the ass.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal cannot expect the hostilities to cool this time, he can't believe that after all the aggravations between the two nations, that this won't escalate the conflict to dangerous levels. The assault at Lugou bridge had started this mess, and Hannibal has enough business associates in the area - enough assets tied up between China and Japan that he must go personally. He cannot hope to stop the war, but he can try to protect the people he needs in the pre-war panic.

His window is limited. He must get in and hopefully out again by the time they start shooting in earnest. Hannibal has no taste for war. It is messy and unprofitable for anyone but arms dealers, and Hannibal deals in the living, not death.

It leaves William alone, allowed full run of the vacation house, while Hannibal makes hasty plans to get overseas. It's as much an expression of trust as it is one of necessity. He barely has time to think about it, busy as he is. But he doesn't worry, not even in the quiet moments he has at night when he has trouble sleeping without the warm, familiar weight beside him.

It's almost unspoken that William would not violate this. Hannibal wanted to believe that the man was his - he had very nearly said as much. The transfer of loyalties, of ownerships - it never needed to be spoken, it could just pass quietly from the government to Hannibal, as easily as he slips his assets out of the country to keep them safe for reinstalling when the war tensions ease up enough. He gets them to safer areas, though he does not send them to the states, and hopes that the rest of the world remembers well enough to leave these tensions to the countries they directly affect.

In the meantime the house is empty, the apartment untended but for William and Winston allowed within, with all the opportunity they need to prove they've deserved the trust.

Will doesn't remember the war. He was three when it started, and he didn't know what it was, why he was hungry and cold, until he was old enough to listen to the radio and understand. His family had never been well off but the war nearly broke them. It hadn't been the easiest childhood but Will had set it behind him, an aside to occasionally refer to as 'the past' not 'his past'. Being with Hannibal in his decadence and riches, in a summer house far enough away from the city and its toil to remember that a depression happened, Will has taken it for granted that something else worse was coming.

He'd stayed in Nantuxent for two days after Hannibal had gone before asking for the car to take him and Winston back. Summer was leaving the city quickly, and it was a disturbing wake-up call from the few months Will had allowed himself to relax and forget. He can't forget. Not with the city on the edge, half excited half terrified of a new war. In the turmoil, Will risked making another call.

He was greeted with cold words and a sarcastic tip to return from his summer vacation. He listened to Jack berate him, accuse him, push him. in the end tell him that if the man wasn't behind bars by fall, Will was out and someone with more drive would be put in his place. He let the dial tone match his heart beat before he finally hung up, resting his head against the cold metal of the box before pushing away and walking home.

He spent a day with Winston, in his crummy, freezing apartment with its cold water and still-broken lock, before returning to Hannibal's, the guilt at leaving Winston behind palpable but not paralyzing; he had never asked if Hannibal wanted the dog in his space. Nantuxent had offered the chance for Winston to spend most of his time outside or by the pool, in the apartment he would have no such luxuries.

It's silent and empty when he comes in and no matter how many lights Will flicks on in his slow walk around the space, it doesn't feel filled. He makes coffee, lets the sounds of the process fill the apartment, lets the smell filter through. It's dark by the time he ventures upstairs to the loft, late into the evening – or perhaps early morning – when he sets his mug on the side table and opens the closet to find the safe.

He doesn't let his eyes skim over the suits hanging there, waiting, half of them his own. He doesn't allow himself to notice that the shoes lined up carefully are a mix of his and Hannibal's. he doesn't let the space affect him, doesn't let it remind him of what it is to him and what it means to be here alone. It's like a painful precursor for what Jack is making him do; this silent, empty apartment that Will doesn't belong in unless Hannibal is with him.

He pulls off his tie, undoes the first three buttons on his shirt and rolls up his sleeves in precise crisp turns. Will settles in front of the safe on his knees, eyes downcast at the prospect, at the idea that he was about to violate something so deep that had been offered to him multiple times, and now more than any other. He sits forward, places his hand on the dial and turns.

The dial turns smoothly in his hand, the action is expensive and oiled and well used. The combination is a series of four numbers - a day, a month, a year beginning with 18. It is not Hannibal's birthday, nor William's. The numbers have meanings, surely, but it isn't something he's ever revealed the origins of. Whoever it was would be thirty eight this year, if they were still alive.

The safe clicks open and reveals a stack of books, a black leather bag that is familiar - thick with currency from three countries, predominantly American. These are bills that have never touched any company he owns, that are untraceable to origin or destination. They are also little help on their own, save the possession implies something difficult and unclear to prove.

The books however, are of deeper interest. Will finds them coded with dots, written in Hannibal's hand when he opens the first page, but in maddening code. Numbers and numbers again, with notes in a maddening confusion of German and Hungarian that say something more about the history that Hannibal is usually so silent on. But here, these are some true records, if William can decipher them - if anyone can.

Hannibal's cleverness may be something of his undoing, when William opens the books into his hands one after the other - there are three, each detailing something different, some dating back to the end of the war, each meticulously kept and confusing as a riddle. It may be that William's curiosity will carry him through his moral confusion.

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Will stays up two days figuring the code out. by that point his hands are shaking and he only barely remembers to call his neighbour to feed Winston.

Each notebook has its own code, and its own rotation per page. After the first, the pattern is easier to figure out and Will spends the time curled up by the window with a notebook at his side, the code and rotation scribbled down in case his mind wanders, just leafing through the pages, taking in everything he can. A lot is personal history, recollections of the war, some notes from his medical school days, things Will feels he isn't privy to, so he doesn't commit the information to memory. He lets it by.

It's in the later books that he starts to find more hints of what he needs. Dates of shipments, locations of pickup. Names. More and more names of people involved in certain branches in Chicago, in New York, Canada. Names which Will knows but had never thought to associate with something like this. And it's here that he starts taking notes in earnest, copying verbatim in his own careful hand until he has enough. he doesn't even reach the end of the notebook and he has enough. To bring down Hannibal, the organization, more than half of the affluent people on the east coast.

Will sets his notes away, carefully returns Hannibal's own to the safe, where he has touched nothing else, and closes the door, spinning the dial until it locks. He rests against the door of the closet when he's finished, eyes closed and body shaking with a mixture of exhaustion and the most hateful dread. He'd found it. The thing he had wanted, the thing the FBI needed. He'd found it when Hannibal had given him every trust available and had faith Will would not take advantage of it. He grits his teeth and presses a hand against his face, determined to keep himself together, to at least do that much honor to the man he's destroying. He manages to keep everything inside except one angry dry sob that he bites his lip to contain.

After what feels like hours, Will stumbles back and crawls into bed, curling up under the covers and letting himself rest.

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Hannibal encounters a mess in Shanghai. The bridge incident is only the start, he knew it would only be the start, but it is less than seven days later when there is shooting in the streets as the Chinese try to drive the Japanese out of their city. It is a battle, an open sore of a war zone, and Hannibal has not stepped over so many corpses in so many streets for a long time. He had hoped never to have to again.

He loses three, three that he would like to have not lost, and takes six amidst a pile of refugees that he ships safely south of the conflict, down into the furthest reaches and out of the path of Japanese advancement inland toward Nanjing.

In the process, Hannibal takes an injury that he does not expect. He has been shot, in the past, but it was a flesh injury only. He had bound it tight and gone on with surgeries under extreme pressure. This, however, is through and through the muscle and it requires surgery of his own. The hospital is packed, crammed full - and the sights and smells are desperately familiar, even though it has been almost twenty years since armistice.

He finds a moment where the phone is not already in use, desperate people calling desperate family, and supposes he is one of those people. He needs to know the world is still sane on the other side of it, so with no regard to the time here or there, he calls. He calls his own apartment, and waits. Lets it ring and ring.

Will nearly misses the call. He's locking the apartment when it comes through, preparing to hide his key before going to pass the information he's found to Jack and wash his hands of it. It's been over a week since he'd decoded the notebooks – ten days - a fortnight since Hannibal had left the country. He rests against the door trying to ignore the urgency of the ring, trying to convince himself that it's not his job, never has been his job, to answer the phone. But something clicks, and it tugs him like a hook in his heart to fumble with the lock and push the door open and catch the receiver before it rings out.

"Hello?" his voice doesn't sound like his own, breathless and nervous and exhausted, a hollow, quiet shadow of what it used to be.

"William," he sighs into the line, and though the sound from the other end was desperate and hollow, distracted sounding, Hannibal is surprisingly pleased to hear it. "I'm sorry I wasn't back when I said I would be."

He leans back, watches the unfamiliar faces mill about in agony. He doesn't know if he should mention his injury - and in the end he doesn't. It's just another scar, high on his arm, and though it would take some time to heal, it hadn't shattered the bone. His own care would keep the wound from going sour.

"I will be back in... four days. I hope it isn't too late," he says, and has a glance at his wristwatch, tries to remember the gap - it feels like he's calling across time. His voice stalls out - he's not sure what to ask - he had only wanted to reach into the gap and touch and find Will Graham at the other end of it. He sighs, allows a moment of weakness much as he had in times past. "Tell me everything is still the same there?"

Will listens to his voice, rests his elbow on the table and splays his fingers in his hair as he ducks his head and just breathes. It's both a comfort and a dagger to the chest to hear

Hannibal call him, call him as though this is what they do, as though this is how things are. He doesn't speak for a long time, just lets Hannibal apologise, explain himself. It hurts more than it should to hear his tone change and ask the one question Will has no idea how to answer.

"The leaves are starting to yellow outside the apartment," he murmurs finally, swallowing and licking his lips before continuing, "It's getting colder." He doesn't mention himself, he doesn't mention if that had changed. His notes are in his pocket, rolled up and ready to pass over when he leaves the apartment.

"It's only six." He addresses Hannibal's other concern, straightening up and sighing, forcing a smile so Hannibal will hear it, "I hope you don't mind that I've been taking advantage of the hot water in your absence."

A soft sound of amusement comes over the line, translated poorly by the miles and miles of phone wire and switchboards between them, faint, but William has heard the sound enough times - half exhale and half voice - that he still understands it.

"Hardly, but I hope you have not been utterly neglecting Winston," he answers, and he lets his eyes close and thinks about Fall coming onto the city, about the trees in their cages turning yellow and brown (never red, not in the city), and of how it has not yet even been a year.

"It's war here," he reveals, not knowing if William has been following the news or not. "Zhabei is on fire. There are machine gun nests in the streets. It seems our Black Thursday and Black Tuesday will soon have a Black Saturday to keep them company."

Hannibal exhales again. "I'm out of touch here, the press is controlled. Tell me Roosevelt isn't planning on involving himself." It's likely too much to hope. William is 26, he is not too old for conscription. Hannibal hopes it won't get so far.

Will sighs, a long, controlled sound, and reaches out to pull a chair closer so he can sit down. He's been following the news in snatches and grabs, too caught up in his own suffocating misery to bring the misery of others into his mind for the moment. But he follows enough to know.

"Just aid." He replies, quiet, not elaborating. There's something oddly painful about knowing Hannibal is in a warzone, even though he is more equipped to be in one than Will is, more experienced, less distracted.

"How many did you lose?" he asks instead, not sure why he wants to keep Hannibal on the phone but knowing he's wont to hang up. The hook is back to tugging.

He knows it cannot stay 'just aid', but perhaps it will buy time, perhaps the hostilities will flare up and die down again, but the whole of the continent is a roiling mass of discontent in the wake of the Great War, and he knows it will fall again as quickly as the coalitions had swung down like dominoes the first time.

Hannibal transfers the phone to balance between his ear and his injured shoulder, and lifts his uninjured hand to pass once, over his face. "Three. And one injury," he adds, but not that it is his own. "I can only get them so far out of the way. There is a new way here, a new sort of government that is far less concerned with a right for safety. The communist party is pervasive."

Hannibal shakes his head. "It will be enough doing to be home in four days, I'll leave it at that I've done what I can."

Will swallows again and has an urge, a sudden painful urge to tell Hannibal what he did. That he broke his trust, that he found what he hoped to never find, what Hannibal promised him he would make difficult. It's a childish, pathetic thing to want, and it's cowardly, over the phone when Hannibal is in another country for four more days. But he wants to tell him to run, to just run.

"Your Chinese investments aren't worth your life, Hannibal." He says instead, "You can survive without them, you're well covered by Europe."

It's the closest he'll come to showing he cares, that he wants Hannibal back alive, exhausted from his flight, perhaps angry at the loss of profit but alive. Jail is just bars, death is something even Will won't be able to fake not caring about. It's on the tip of his tongue, the words that normal lovers say, that people who spend time together say. They're there. And he sighs and doesn't say them.

"I know," Hannibal answers, but he is responding to the unspoken part, rather than the assertion that he was taking a foolish risk. He had to come himself, had to do this himself, but now he was ready to be done. He won't die, war hasn't killed him yet.
Hannibal feels somewhat better to know that half a world away things are still quiet, that he can go home and treat the war as just another set of conditions that will affect his numbers and wait and wait for the rest to happen.

"Four days," he reassures. "My flight is 716, it should arrive at 11am, but I expect some delays."

He lets the pause stretch afterward, and then finally, "I'll see you then."

There is a moment, just one, that's been cued up for William to say it. To admit what he did or to wish Hannibal well. He does neither, he just breathes and licks his lower lip into his mouth and closes his eyes tightly.

"716," he repeats, "11am with delays."

Hannibal says his last but doesn't hang up. And Will waits. A beat, two, before letting out a quick frustrated breath. Run. RUN.

"Try to sleep on the plane." He tells him.

"I would rather sleep at home," Hannibal suggests gently, and then, to make it final, he says, "Goodbye, William."

He pulls the hook down, replaces the receiver, and gets back to recovering. He checks out of the hospital that night, and then out of the city, further south to take a plane from someplace not so besieged, but he is only partially successful.

And as he waits in the sound of gunfire, on the tarmac of the runway as his plane waits for clearance so it will not be shot out of the sky, he thinks this won't be the end of it. It is certainly, now, only a war of the far east. Eventually it will spread, as the first had. But it is not spreading yet. Germany is closed and close, he muses, killing itself from the inside, and war has become a thing that spreads like a cough.

When the plane disembarks in Philadelphia twenty hours later, Hannibal's arm is slung close to his body, his eyes are dark and tired, though perhaps that is more from the exhaustion than the horror. Perhaps it is both. But no one is waiting for him at the end of the plane's skybridge, no one at the end of the terminal. He had expected William, and when he does not find the man, he knows to straighten his tie in the men's room, to unsling his arm for dignity, even if it won't do his wound any favors. It is paranoia, he tells himself, as he pushes his hair into perfect order, as he straightens his suit jacket and puts the sling carefully into his briefcase. It's traffic, he's late, he forgot the time or his dog had some trouble.

It's the press that's waiting for him outside the airport, flashing lightbulbs and police officers with handcuffs, and Hannibal feels exhausted, utterly exhausted as they pull hard enough to wrench his stitches threateningly even when he relents with no resistance. They take his gun, they take his briefcase and keys, and his eyes work the crowd to try and find William there - he should at least gloat, Hannibal thinks. He should at least savor the victory.

But if he's there, Hannibal doesn't see him before they load him in the car, still silent, because the headlines will scream enough words that he needs none.

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Will spends the day locked in his apartment, when Hannibal lands. He has unplugged his phone, has refused anyone entry into the space despite the incessant knocking and Jack’s brash voice demanding he come out. He’d asked his name not to be related to the arrest, not for Hannibal’s sake, the man will know, but for his own. Selfish, but Will feels he deserves a certain level of selfishness with what has been asked of him by Jack, what he was forced to give up due to his own stupid moral conscience. He refuses to use this as a stepping stone for something bigger.

Winston trots over with a whine and nuzzles into Will’s hands. He pets him absently but his eyes remain unfocused. Tired. After their phone call, Will had left the apartment and tossed the key into the first rubbish bin he’d seen, burying it amongst the trash the city collected on its own. He’d given only one page of his notes to Jack, citing his lack of time to find more, his lack of resources.

‘He’s meticulous,’ he’d said, eyes down and voice quiet, ‘You saw how long it took me to get what I have. Use it. but leave me out of it.’

‘What do you mean leave you out of it?’ Jack sounds as angry at having something as he does at not. He’s one of the most difficult people to read.

‘I mean leave me out of it.’ he returns, tone slightly harsher, and the look he flicks up to Jack one he’s never dared give his boss before, but he is far from caring, ‘I spent nearly a year undercover, Jack, I have met most of the men running this family. They know my face. What do you think they’ll do to me if you take my name public? Leave me out of it.’

He remembers Jack’s complete shock at the fact that he’d spoken out, that he’d had the audacity to walk out of his office without being dismissed. But his words had obviously hit home, no one from the press was trying to knock down his door for a statement, and his head was still on his shoulders, so the betrayal hadn’t been traced back to him. Hannibal had left so suddenly that perhaps those that knew of Will assumed he’d gone with him. it was that time that was saving him, and nothing more.

Eventually the knocking stops, outside, the cars increase for peak hour and dull down for night. And Will still hasn’t moved. Hasn’t turned on the radio or bought the evening edition of the paper to see Hannibal’s name smeared through the dirt. Finally, he stands, walking to his desk and pulling open the top drawer where the rest of his notes from Hannibal’s notebooks lie flat and ordered. He just stares. At the dates, the names, the figures he had not given Jack, and then he closes the drawer with a snap and goes to bed.

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Hannibal could have used his one call on something as unrealistic and foolish as calling William, but there is no end in that. He instead calls his lawyers, the whole team - smiling, well-read men whom William has met before, and who dig Hannibal out of his cell and quickly into court for his bail hearing.

It would be unnecessary to suggest that he could not post his bail, though they manage to set it to an unreasonable rate, and they preen and primp themselves, suggesting they have such evidence. Hannibal knows what they could have, how very much of it they could try to drown him under, but he holds his cool. He gives them as much nothing as he had all along, because they are not Will Graham.

He still sees no sign of the man, and it continues as he steps into his apartment - empty and suddenly vulnerable feeling. There is no faint greeting from the other room as he sets down his suitcase and leaves it, finally slinging his arm back up again now that he is in private. He passes his hand over the island where they had often sat, and moves upstairs to stare at the big empty bed.

Hannibal finds himself wishing the place had burned down in his absence, and checks himself into a hotel room under the pretence of avoiding the press camped out at the front door of his known residence, while his lawyers work and work and work to bring the date of the trial up so fast that the state will have on time to organize its evidence or excuses.

He could ask himself why, but he knows. He could ask 'why' of himself - why he had insisted on holding so tight to something he knew to be poisonous and dangerous. It was because he had been fascinated. because at the point when he should have discarded William as served his purpose, Hannibal had been so certain that he could bend him and turn him - that the man wanted to be bent or turned. They had both fooled each other, he thinks.

Hannibal sets about his arrangements, issuing instructions to underlings in his carefully coded way, and thinks about how they'd spoken just a little bit before, about how much had gone unsaid and how subtly things had changed and shifted. Hannibal wonders if his requirements for the public destruction of Will Graham are superfluous.

He wonders if the man isn't already destroying himself.

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Will refuses to testify. He cites fear for his life again but it doesn't fly with Jack, not twice, and Will has resorted to a mix of rage and blatant pleading. He can't be on that stand. He can't look the man in the eyes and bring up his own secrets against him. the more this continues, the more Will wonders if it really was the higher moral path to take, and that doubt alone eats him alive. He concedes to signing his rights to speak over to another agent, promises to undergo a psych evaluation to show he is incapable of doing it himself, otherwise the words won't hold up in court.

They won't even if Will says them. He didn't give enough evidence to do more than jail Hannibal, the most important information Will still has, in the top drawer of his desk, hidden just as surely as Hannibal's original notes are hidden in the safe. He doesn't sleep anymore. He follows the trial through the paper only, refusing to hear it broadcast on the news. He knows the case is flimsy at best, he knows both the FBI and the family are chomping at the bit to start a war over this, a bloody destructive thing, and yet something holds them both at bay.

He watches as the date of the trial gets brought up, reads how the evidence is passed as circumstantial, how there is nothing to back up the claims, how every case of smuggling and trafficking has paperwork to back up the people transported, that they were taken from besieged countries, saved from a worse death. It's a strange cocktail of triumph and nausea that crawls up Will's throat and down his spine. Hannibal had prepared for this, much more than Will had anticipated he would. If he had thrown all his research behind this, his entire will and power to convince, maybe then he'd have him pinned. But he doesn't. He sits back and watches this happen, watches his career and his life run through the dirt along with Hannibal's reputation.

Hannibal, on the other hand, has no option but to be present at his trial. He sits under fire, feeling more as if he were in the lineup against the fence than he had while he was in China. But he is smooth, and his lawyers are good, and Will -

William fails to appear to testify. He sends experts, the FBI trots out handwriting analysts who point out that the page is certainly in Hannibal's handwriting, that it matches paper he is known to keep. But it had been obtained without warrant, in secret, and Hannibal's lawyers were such that they rendered a warrant for the rest impossible until after the trial had already begun.

Hannibal discovers, when they finally obtain one, that nothing incriminating remains and it leaves him puzzled, distant as he sits and fails to pay attention to the proceedings, with his hands pressing against his mouth and under his chin as his eyes slid away and tried to discern what it meant.

William had deciphered the code. He had an overwhelming body of evidence, and he had held it back. By all rights, by every mob rule in effect, for simply the indecency and mudslinging of a trial he should have Graham killed but - he stays his hand as surely as William did. He holds his men, who are indignant on his behalf, he calms and soothes and suggests amongst the upper echelons that he has the situation in hand, that he will see to it.

Hannibal stays his hand, because William had. Vindictively, because he wants William to see what they drag up and out of the depths - how much of it he has layered and layered, but unfortunately all they discover is what Will has given them, and it's nearly nothing.

He never even has to sit on the witness stand.

Hannibal strides free of the courthouse, where he owned the judge and the jury, he owned everything but the tooth-gnashing federal agent, Crawford, who had headed the investigation. He greets the press demurely, humbly.

"I have no comment on the diligent work the FBI has done to better our country and keep it free from the vices we so often find ourselves straying toward," Hannibal begins, looking up into the camera, and then down again, as if he were a politician reading a speech. "I am certain that what they expected to find is not what they ultimately found themselves with. I accept the apologies of the city and the FBI for their wrongful accusations and for this trial."

He fixed his eyes on Crawford, and silently vowed revenge - but not on Will Graham. Not on the man who had the sword and held it, though he had cut himself from both directions in the process. Crawford will fall through the cracks and by the wayside, and what vengeance his boys seek on his behalf, Hannibal will not attempt to stay.

Hannibal concludes his statement. He checks out of the hotel where he had stayed. There are cogs and wheels in motion that even he can't stop now, a patience game about to happen, and if he could he would call Will Graham again just to hear his voice - to see if it had changed already, or if the change would ultimately be wrought by what he was about to endure.

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The verdict takes up the entire front page of the morning paper and Will doesn’t waste time. He flips on the radio for the first time in days, sets it to the first channel that plays music and starts to burn his files. He sets up the metal dustbin in his bathroom, tosses a lit book of matches in and adds papers to fuel it.

He burns Hannibal’s first. The notes he never gave, the notes he should never have had in the first place. He makes sure they’re curled and ash before adding his personal files, one after the other. In the main room the radio blares, covering the sound of his hasty packing and destruction of his entire self. Winston is on the bed, head cocked and watching his master. The faster Will works, the higher the panic rises. He had been left alone the entire time the trial was going. He doubted he’d be granted that mercy now that Hannibal was free, and free to exercise his own brand of justice.

Will doesn’t let his mind linger on the fact that he hadn’t left earlier, that he hadn’t taken a night train to wherever his remaining money could take him and escape. Hide. Drop off the

grid.

Perhaps because he'd felt an obligation to see the trial through, to make sure that it ended with the man released. It was the most twisted Stockholm syndrome but Will had been paralyzed by it. and now, perhaps, it would end him.

He's in the middle of packing a duffel when the song switches on the radio. It's Fred Astaire, a song he's heard playing in cafes and at the dry cleaners when he'd still had a normal life. When he wasn't destroying his existence in a dustbin. The lyrics weave into and out of the windows Will has flung open, the sound a comforting buzz of words he doesn't actually hear anymore as he returns to the bathroom with another handful of files.

And perhaps if he hadn't had the music so loud, if he wasn't so preoccupied with rushing, he would have heard the door open. He would've registered Winston's bark as more than a cry for attention. He would've been prepared for his vision to black out with the suffocating bag over his head. Perhaps he would've fought more.

But it's such a finality, that bag, all his vision gone in the briefest of moments, his ability to breathe shuttered and partially stolen, and Will has never been more scared in his life. He struggles, twisting out of the hands holding him, kicking anything he can reach, the instinct to live waking up after so long dormant in Will's exhausted mind. And then there's a loud whimper and Will freezes, keeping completely motionless and listening for more sounds of his dog's pain. There is none. Just the song on the radio drawing to a close, and Will sobs, loudly, when everything presses down on him.

The trial, the inevitability of suffering, the knowledge that he'd been responsible for the suffering of his dog, for the suffering of the man the FBI had sent when he had called in a tip, the suffering Hannibal had to endure during the trial, the betrayal he must've felt stepping off that plane… Will cries out, a loud and sudden thing, and gets a gag for his trouble. The struggle resumes, angrier and more desperate now that Will has nothing to lose anymore, and perhaps that's why whatever impacts with the back of his head doesn't quite knock him unconscious. But he falls to the floor nonetheless, winded and dizzy.

And the radio drones, as he is pulled to his feet and dragged out. *Nice work if you can get it, and if you get it won't you tell me how?*

Chapter End Notes

No doubt - endings are hard. But then again... nothing ever really ends, does it? ;)

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